

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Beautiful DISASTER



"Beautiful Disaster is insanely addictive. Beautifully sexy, beautifully intense, and beautifully perfect."

—Jessica Park, author of *New York Times* bestseller *Flat-Out Love*

JAMIE McGUIRE

A Beautiful Disaster

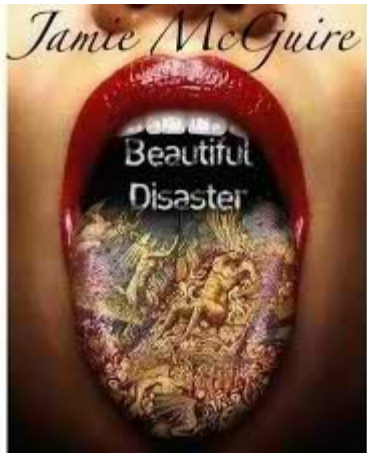
by Jamie McGuire

Rated: NC-17

Summary:

Sequel to Heartbreak Remedy. As Bella & Edward continue to share their lives, they explore their deepest fantasies & push their limits together. BxE, AU/AH, very OOC. BDSM. NC-17 rated for language & situations.

LEMONS aplenty.



Chapter 1

I close my eyes as I sag against the wall of the elevator, the light ding drowned out by my sigh of relief.

Finally home.

All I want to do now is kiss my beautiful girl, grab something to eat, and take a long hot shower. Or maybe a bath, with Bella. Just snuggle together, relax, let this fucking long day come to a slow, sweet end.

I only open my eyes after the elevator comes to a stop at the top floor, where I shuffle over to the door on the right of the short hallway. I'm sure that our nosy neighbor is watching me again, but what can I say, I really don't care. The walls are sound proof, the windows mirrored, if that old hag gets off on keeping track how often we come and go, I'll be the last one to get in her face. After all, we're just a young couple, happily in love, and have nothing to hide.

I laugh softly to myself as I get my keys out and let myself in.

If only she knew.

Still grinning I kick my shoes off, dump my messenger bag on the floor in the entryway, and hang my jacket into the closet before I make a beeline for the fridge. I'm starving, and I'm thirsty, and while I long to find out if Bella is home already, I need to fulfill my primal needs first before we end up in a tumble of sweaty limbs on the lime green flokati rug in front of the fireplace. Although *actually* making sweet love to my girl on the rug sounds like a really good idea. We can always take that bath another day.

Quickly making sure that Bella isn't anywhere in sight I take a deep draft from the OJ, smirking at myself that she has already domesticated me to the point where I feel bad about drinking straight from the carton. Not that she doesn't do it herself when she thinks I'm not watching, mind you, but for some weird reason we both fall into the habit of playing house when we're in the kitchen. Behaving ourselves. Being all proper and nice.

I make a mental note that I dearly need to fuck my girl on the kitchen counter before the weekend. Five weeks since we moved in, and still the kitchen remains undefiled. Can't have that.

I'm lucky and find there's a microwave dish with some leftovers from yesterday. Not bothering to heat the food, I wolf down half of the contents of the container before I grab a can of Coke, relishing the prickling sensation on my tongue as I take a sip.

I'm just about to close the fridge when I notice a folded sheet of paper taped to the door. Continuing to ravage the food, I pick it up and open it on the counter, idly chewing and swallowing as I stare at the

brief note.

I'm waiting for you. Upstairs.

My appetite quickly recedes, or rather redirects itself. No longer hungry for food I set the dish back in the fridge, and quickly gulp down my soda. Can't make Bella wait, after all.

As I hurry up the stairs I wonder where she's waiting for me. Only two choices really, the bedroom or the playroom. Right or left. As I round the bend in the staircase I see the bedroom door wide open, and for a moment I'm nearly disappointed. Not that I mind some nice 'nilla loving, but why would she leave me a note for that?

As I'm just about to enter the bedroom I see light flicker over the white wall, and as I turn slowly, I realize that the playroom door is open, just a sliver. A smile spreads on my face as I peek inside, my cock already stirring.

And there she is, my beautiful Bella, kneeling on the pillow on the floor, her back to me. She is completely naked, of course, her mahogany hair cascading down over one shoulder as her head is bent. Around her are four huge white pillar candles, casting the otherwise empty playroom into a warm light.

My cock gets almost painfully hard, but I will my boner to subside. Not that that helps much, seeing her like this, but I can't exactly follow my urges and just take her right there and fuck her until she comes screaming on my cock. As enticing as the view might be, I get the message she's left for me with the setup.

For one, she wants to play, not just fuck. I'm also sure that she chose the candles for a reason, or else she would just have put the lights on dim.

That, and we have been talking a lot about trying something new for her, but I haven't gotten down to actually doing anything yet as our schedule has been all screwed up this week. But now that we have the evening to ourselves, Bella clearly has other plans than spend it snuggling in front of the TV.

I slowly step away from the door, trying not to make any additional noise as I go into the bathroom adjacent to our bedroom and quickly undress. She must have heard me blundering around the condo, but I can at least try to be stealthy now. For a moment I consider whacking off in the shower to take care of my hard-on, but the fact of the matter is that I *am* tired.

Ice cold shower it is then.

Five minutes later I'm feeling vaguely human again after a vigorous rub-down with the soft new towels. I even consider just going all naked, but I know how much Bella loves the leather pants, and I'm doing this as much for her as for myself. So I quickly put them on, having to jump up and down a few times to make them sit well. The downside of being with a girl who can cook amazingly well – either I run another ten miles a week, or I start cutting back on the candy. Or fast food. Can't have that,

so more running it will have to be.

As I pad across the hallway and step up to the playroom door I try to come up with a plan. My gaze falls on the scented candles that are stored in the closet next to the bedroom. Of course I can't use them for a scene, but some extra light is always good, and the heady scent of vanilla and sandalwood can create a good atmosphere. Bella is being forward, and I feel I need to reward her for being so brave. Might as well make sure it's going to be a real night to remember for her, and not just because she stepped up to confront one of her more irrational fears.

Picking up two of the huge cube candles with the many wicks I take them with me as I enter the playroom. Bella hasn't moved, and while her head is still bent and her eyes cast down, I'm sure she's following my every move with eagerness.

I place the candles left and right of her, outside of the square the other candles are set up in, and light them, brightening the room. The mirrored walls only add to the effect, and I take a moment to drink in her divine body.

Exercising regularly has done a lot to improve her slim but well proportioned build, as does the yoga for her balance. Her thighs and belly are firm now, the muscles in her arms and legs slightly defined, and she can hold position a lot longer now than when we started. Not that I ever minded a little softness, on the contrary, but I know that she needs the strength and stamina for what we do. Also, going for a run together has become one of my favorite things to do with Bella, including a nice, long shower afterwards, and the occasional blowjob behind a convenient tree.

I'm tempted to fuss around with something just to annoy her a little, but I don't really feel like taking my time. I'm just as eager as she must be, and I really want to get down to business. So I reach for the soft, white silk ropes, the only other thing I will be needing tonight, and return to where Bella is kneeling on the floor. Picking up the pillar candles I position them closer so that I can reach them without getting up again before I kneel down behind her.

She doesn't move when I reach around her and run my hand over her thigh from her knee up, squeezing gently. I kiss her shoulder, then suck hard on the soft spot at the side of her neck that I know drives her crazy, and she only shivers a little. Good girl, knows it's not her place to react until I show her that I want her to.

Sucking turns to licking, then I kiss her warm skin until I feel goose bumps marching down her leg. She still hasn't moved, but I can tell that keeping still is killing her.

“Good evening, my little vixen. How thoughtful of you to wait like this for your Master,” I purr into her ear, watching in the mirror as she catches her bottom lip between her teeth and bites down to stifle a low moan. “Don't you want to wish me a good evening, too?”

She raises her head and catches my gaze over the mirror, then turns her face to me so that our noses nearly brush. Her eyes are wide and dark in the twilight of the room, lust and anticipation clouding them.

“Good evening, Sir.”

Her luscious lips remain slightly parted when she falls silent, and I take the invitation, brushing mine over them lightly before I grab her hair hard and pull her head back. She gasps, effectively opening her mouth, and I kiss her more roughly, plunging my tongue inside, taking, exploring. Bella moans again, this time loudly, making me grin as I pull back, my hand still grasping her soft locks.

“I really appreciate your openness,” I tell her, my eyes boring into hers intently. “But I'm not going to fuck you tonight.” She remains impassive, already too used to the way I play my games.

Months ago a look of disappointment would have crossed her features, but now she just remains calm, waiting. I smile, which is probably more a hungry leer, before I go on.

“Unless you're a good little slut and earn it.”

I know that she doesn't really get off on the name calling, but it's one of the few compromises we've made. Bella knows that I don't exactly mean it in a degrading way, it's part of the game for me, and as such she appreciates it.

I think it's one of the last vestiges of her moral high ground that I keep tearing down, her way of being reluctant to fully succumb to me. I respect that, although I don't necessarily like her view. But we all have something that simply rubs us the wrong way, and as long as we can make it work, I won't push her. Too much. One of these days we will have to have another of those 'I don't really get why you're holding on to your former self' talks, but as it is, I'm damn excited she's willing to push her physical limits. And we have time, no need to jump the gun.

Bella's pant draws me back into the here and now, and I let go of her hair as I have made my point.

“You want that, though, don't you? You want to be fucked.”

“Yes, Sir.”

My cock twitches in my pants, and I quickly think of something unpleasant to dampen the effect her whispered words have on me. Nothing gets me like her being in full on submissive mode. I nudge her chin with my nose, signaling her to straighten up again and look forward instead of at me, and she quickly complies, a smile playing across the corners of her mouth.

When she's still again, I put both my hands at her hips, then bring them up over her flat stomach to cup her breasts. Her nipples are hard already from her being naked for so long, but also from excitement, and I idly pluck on them before I grab her tits hard, squeezing. Her breath hitches for a moment, but she doesn't tense up, instead relaxes further. I keep playing with her nipples, rolling them between my fingers while I watch her in the mirror.

I shift my grip a little, and let my right hand drift lower, down to her hip again. She eagerly spreads her legs wider, and I smirk as I cup her sex with my hand. A quick swipe with my finger around her entrance reveals just how wet she already is, wet and ready for me. I gather some of her juices and run my fingers between her pussy lips until I reach her clit. A soft moan escapes her as I circle it, quickly cutting off when I instead pinch her labia hard, repeatedly. Even though she tenses up now I know she likes it, as her hips are still pushed towards my hand, not ever bucking away to evade me.

I let go of her again and place another soft kiss onto the side of her neck, a sweet and unnecessary reminder of why I'm doing this. Then I lean back and reach for the ropes, quickly getting to work.

Starting with her wrists, I draw her arms back until her elbows touch and bind them together, using a different rope for her wrists so I can keep them restrained even when I undo the other knots. Bella instinctively tilts her torso back more until her knuckles reach the floor, stabilizing herself so I can move on. A tie in her hair keeps her tresses in check and forces her to hold her head high, giving me better access to her delicious body.

It would have been easier for me to bind her arms at the end as now I have to fumble as I bring the longer rope several times around her torso, back and forth above and below her breasts, before I grab her tits and wind more rope tightly around each full globe. Bella whimpers a little at the unfamiliar feeling as she's used to me going for less restrictive breast bondage normally, but I want her tits sensitive, yearning to be touched. A few more knots and I'm done, leaving her tits constricted at the base and sticking out from her body invitingly.

I move to her thighs next and bind her ankles to them, rendering her helpless that way. A few more loops around her waist follow, and I bring the last length of rope from above her belly button between her pussy lips, and tie it to the waist ropes in back. I check all the knots, they are tight and the ropes bite into her flesh, but for the limited time I'm planning to leave them in place that's okay.

My focus shifts to the rise and fall of her chest – she is clearly excited, but I decide I need to let her stew a little longer. Instead of reaching for the candles like she probably expects, I run my fingers softly over her body, her thighs, her stomach, her arms, barely skimming her breasts, while I kiss her neck gently. I can feel her body respond, her pulse picks up, and the calm and serene demeanor leaves her. She leans further towards me but I stay out of her reach, just close enough so she can feel my body heat, but I don't allow her to touch me. Yet.

The soft caresses and kisses drive her wild, and when I run my fingers down the crotch rope, they come away soaked. I'd say she is ready to step up the pace.

Bella's eyes open fully as she feels me withdraw, and her breath leaves in a loud rush as she watches me pick up the first candle. I've tested them before, until I come really close to her body I can't really hurt her with the wax, nothing she can't take. I still direct a most wicked grin at her that makes her shiver, then bring my free hand around her hips to make sure that she can't buck away too much and destroy my aim.

Her muscles tense up all over her body as she stares at the flame, her lip again caught between her teeth as she tries to remain calm. I blow over the wet spot on her neck until she is shaking, distracting her until I suddenly tilt the candle and splash a few drops of wax onto her chest. They all hit her just above the ropes where I know they don't really hurt her, and after a shudder Bella stills again, slightly less tense.

The next drops I aim at her right breast, hitting the fleshy part that is constricted by the silk ropes. A slight whimper leaves her, but that's it, so I move to the left, bringing my aim a little closer to her nipple, but still staying away. Somewhat shy at first, she soon pushes her shoulders further back, the motion putting her breasts even more on display. I keep up my game until there is only a little wax left in the pool around the wick. I stop and smirk at her, waiting until her eyes widen in light apprehension, before I dribble the rest onto her hard nipples.

The hiss that escapes her goes right to my dick, making it twitch and strain against the leather pants. I watch intently as Bella fights the pain, but the glassy look in her eyes together with the sudden deep blush on her cheeks tells me that my girl is enjoying herself alright. I wait until the wax is mostly cooled before I grab her nipples between my thumbs and forefingers, squeezing and rolling until all the wax has peeled off, and she is moaning with need. My lips find hers and I kiss her hungrily, sliding my tongue against hers as I keep mauling her tits.

Bella stills again as I pick up the second candle, but her eyes remain hooded with lust even when I drip more wax onto her sensitive nipples. She barely moves away now so I let the hand that doesn't hold the candle roam lower until I reach her pussy. She's even wetter now, and I can't hide a satisfied smile. I start rubbing the rope over her clit until she bucks her hips against my hand, a few needy sounds leaving her – and then I spill nearly the whole pooled wax over her left breast and down her belly where it gets held up by the rope around her waist.

Her eyes go wide and she shouts “fuck!” as I take her completely by surprise. I barely give her body time to recuperate as I snatch the next candle up and do the same to her other side. Her whole body shakes as the hot wax cascades over her sensitive tit, but her moan is needy and loud, before I stifle it with my hungry mouth. Her hips jerk as I rub her harder, telling of her need to get more friction where she needs it.

I turn my head away from hers and trail my fingers up to her stomach, but she doesn't protest, just sags against me as I scoot a little closer. I love the sight of the now hardened wax on her body, but I resist the urge to peel it off from anywhere but her nipples. Bella glances down at my fingers freeing her swollen and sensitive nubs again, and for a moment a stubborn set comes to her jaw.

Inwardly amused by her evident battle to keep her resentment at what I'm doing to herself, I stop and grab her chin, forcing her to turn her head and look at me. Defiance lights up her already expressive eyes, making me forget for a moment what I wanted to do to her other than ravage her mouth and fuck her hard.

“Bella, Bella, do we have to work on your appreciation for what I do to you, again?” I taunt her with

a hard edge to my voice.

Her eyes widen and she grows slightly pale underneath the flush of excitement, and I can tell that she's thinking hard for a moment whether she has done anything wrong. Of course she hadn't, and when she comes to the same conclusion, she relaxes slightly.

“No, Sir.”

“Are you sure? You just seemed a little, how shall I phrase it, ungrateful for all the attention I bestow upon your lovely body?” She's fighting a grin at my playful tone and weird phrasing, and that ultimately breaks the spell. I smile as I feel her relax against me, and lust replaces the apprehension on her face.

“I'm sure, Sir. Whatever you choose to do to me, I'm yours.” She closes her eyes as she leans further into me, but I'm having none of that.

“Open your eyes. I want you to watch what I'm doing to you.” Her lids flutter before she looks at me, a light smile gracing those sensuous lips. I break eye contact then and concentrate on her body instead. I love touching her like this, when she's helpless and can't evade me. She's so responsive, arching into my hands as small sounds escape her. I gently stroke her wax covered tits before I twist her nipples hard, returning to soft touches as she shudders from the twin spikes of pain. I attack her neck again, tease her relentlessly with my tongue and lips while I grab her breasts hard. Wax cracks and peels off in places while she moans, calling to my cock. I could do this forever, but very likely I'd go insane before long.

A last check at her pussy, and I know she's as ready as she gets. Bella sighs as I let go of her and reach for the last candle, her eyes seeking out mine. Whatever she sees there makes her relax further against me. She keeps looking at my face a moment longer before she turns her head to follow the path of the candle over her body. My hand is back between her legs, only that now I'm reaching lower. She thrusts her hips hard when I part the twin ropes over her crotch just enough so that I can tease the entrance of her pussy, but keep the full friction over her clit.

“Are you a good girl, Bella?”

She shudders as she hears the growl in my voice, a silent warning that I expect her to behave.

“Yes, Sir!”

“You know that you have to ask permission before you come?” Once more she shudders, but probably more due to my finger dipping into her and drawing lazy circles just inside her pussy, driving her wild.

“I know,” she groans out, the cutest of lines appearing on her forehead as she tries to hold back.

“Do you think you can come when I pour the wax over your tits and cunt?”

Come for me?” I whisper into her ear, letting her hear how much the idea of that turns me on.

Bella's answer is a loud moan, and I watch with amusement as her breathing picks up further.

“Yes, Sir!”

Chapter 2

I attack her neck again for a few moments, then prop my chin up on her shoulder the better to see what I'm doing. Her panting is the sweetest music to me as I scare her a little, pretending to dip the candle but pulling back before any wax can spill over. I know that under different circumstances she would call me out on that shit, but she's too far gone now, and anything I do is just adding to her arousal.

Then I decide that she has suffered enough, and let the wax splash into her body – two well-aimed gushes onto her nipples, the rest onto her lower belly onto the crotch rope so that it spills left and right down over her pubic mount and labia. At the same time I thrust two fingers into her, fast and as deep as I can reach.

Bella arches her back and shouts, a hoarse cry full of pleasure, laced with just a little pain to make it interesting. I feel her whole body shudder as she comes from the onslaught of sensation, beautiful in her abandon. I set the candle down and thread my fingers through her hair, turning her head to me so that I can stifle her whimpers with my lips and tongue, while I keep fucking her slowly to draw out her orgasm.

After a while she stops clenching around my fingers and I slowly withdraw them, but keep kissing her while I wrap my arms around her for a while, letting her come back down to earth.

Sadly, my cock has other ideas when Bella's bound hands brush against my crotch accidentally. And so does she, as her fingers are back in an instant, stroking me idly through the soft leather. I grin against her mouth before I turn my head away and let go of her as I stand up in one smooth motion.

Bella remains kneeling, gazing up at me through her thick lashes. I quickly try to come up with a plan for what to do, and curse myself for not having a backup idea at hand. But she really surprised me with her eagerness to try the wax play.

The obvious answer is often the easiest one, and after a moment's hesitation I go for it. A light smile plays around Bella's lips as she watches me undo my pants and get my dick out. I'm so hard already that I'm afraid I'll come way too soon, but then she usually has that effect on me in the playroom.

She obediently opens her mouth when I step up to her, and I sneer a “Suck my cock, bitch!” down at her, which is really unnecessary as she is already closing her lips around it. I can't stifle a groan when she starts sucking in earnest, her tongue pressed flat against the underside of my dick. I normally love to let her do the work, but tonight I'm honestly too horny myself, so I grab her hair and start to fuck her mouth in short hard strokes.

I have to pull out when she starts humming, and as I glare down at her I see her smirking up at me. It's frustrating to know that she can read me so well now, but then she spends ample time sucking me off.

“Care to tell me what's so funny, slut?”

Not even that can wipe the grin off her face, so I don't wait for her answer, but instead reach down

and push her onto the floor so that she's lying on her side, helpless as she can't even balance herself due to the bonds.

While she is distracted I kneel down and pull on her bonds until the heel of her lower leg is touching her ass and her upper knee is at her chest, leaving her completely open for me.

The sensation of her pussy clamping down on my cock as I thrust into her is heavenly, and I groan as I sheath myself fully inside of her. Bella gasps at the intrusion, the whole motion forcing the crotch rope to press even harder into her. I also feel it chafing against the sides of my cock, a sensation I'm glad of as it allows me to hold back a little longer.

I try to hold back but I simply can't, seeing her writhe under me just makes me want to come let go. I grab the ropes keeping her restrained for leverage as I start fucking her, hard enough to push and pull her along the floor. Bella pants and thrashes under me, her eyes half closed. They go wide as I shift my weight and lean over her, my weight on my fists next to her head.

I stare deep into those wonderful pools of lust as I increase my speed, pumping into her without holding back anymore. Her high moans and cries urge me on further, and I'm in heaven. I'm lost in her eyes as I finally come deep inside of her.

Strength leaves me and I roll off her before I can sag onto her, which I try to avoid at all costs as she's halfway lying on her strained and bound arms already. I'm lucky not to have knocked over one of the candles, and hastily blow it out before anything else can happen.

Bella is still panting hard next to me as I catch my breath, a look of conflict on her face as she nibbles on her lip. Smirking, I gather her close so that she's half lying on me, her back and arms pressed against my chest and side. She can't see my face as I softly kiss her neck, making her shiver while her groan sounds treacherously frustrated.

"Do you want to come again?" I ask her, teasing her with my tongue licking over the shell of her ear.

"Please!" she pants in answer, her need clear in her voice.

"Oh I don't know if I should let you come. You're such a greedy girl sometimes."

She's silent for a moment, either gathering her wits or cursing me in her thoughts. Probably both. I don't really care, as long as her response remains the same. Seconds tick by, until I hear her sigh nearly inaudibly.

"Please, Master, make me come again?"

I'm still not done teasing her, but can't resist reaching for her breast and idly picking at the wax on the now slightly cooler flesh. Bella hisses, telling me that I've kept the bonds on her long enough to oversensitize the bound areas, mainly her tits.

"Only if you beg me nicely."

Again she sighs, and I smirk as I slap her breast, hard. Her breath catches in her throat, and this time it is real pain that mars her face for a second.

She should know better than to sigh in exasperation where I can hear it.

“Sir, please, may I come again? I'm so wound up and horny from the light burn of the wax, and from you fucking me, please, make me come?

Please?”

I smile down at her as I rearrange her body again until I'm more or less sitting with her lying in my arms. Reaching down so I can rub her clit through the crotch rope, I idly pinch her nipple with the other. Bella arches her back, looking nearly content for a moment as I resume masturbating her – until I slap her breast again, not quite as hard, but hard enough to hurt.

She cranes her head so she can look up into my face, and I smirk at her as I hit her bound tit again. Her groan speaks of her discomfort, but I can tell that her body is responding already. By now most of the wax has peeled off her tortured tit, so I switch sides, slapping the other one until the wax is gone from there, too.

“Please -” she whispers, making me stop and look into her face again.

I raise my brows, telling her silently to go on. Her eyes are wide once more, urging me on.

“Please don't stop. Please don't stop!”

I grin, but of course don't follow her begging. Instead I push her forward into a sitting position so that I can undo the bonds around her arms, also those keeping her wrists connected. She looks at me with surprise when I pull her back against me, grabbing her breasts in both hands while my fingers worry her nipples.

“I want you to make yourself come, my little minx. Rub yourself until you come.”

A smile tugs at the corners of her mouth as she nods and reaches between her legs, her other hand idle on her bound thigh.

“Thank you -” she starts to say, but my tongue plunging into her mouth makes it impossible for her to finish the sentence. She relaxes into me, but only for a second, until I start running my short nails all over her tits. Small whimpers escape between our lips, and before long I feel her shudder all over as her climax is approaching.

She's trying to ask for permission to come, but I simply won't let her. I'm wondering how long she will hold out – or will she just come without permission?

But my girl knows better than that, her needy mewls get louder and louder, but she's all tensed up with the effort to stop herself from coming. A minute passes, two, in which I just revel in the sense of power I have over her. It's really just a small thing, but the fact alone that she's fighting her need to

orgasm just because I won't tell her that she can is giving me a kick that goes beyond the physical sensation of coming deep inside of her. She's doing this for *me*, and me alone.

I take pity on her then and withdraw long enough to pant, "Come for me!" before my lips crash down on hers again, devouring her. At the same time, I grab her breasts hard and squeeze them until I feel her body going slack in the throes of passion.

While she is still shaking with the aftermath of her release I stroke her tits softly, and watch the light cast by the candles flicker over her reddened flesh. She nuzzles into the crook of my neck, her breath still fast and hot on my skin, and we stay like that for a while. I smile down at her beautiful body before I start untying her, working slowly to give her limbs time to resume a more comfortable position. Bella only moans when the blood comes rushing back into her breasts, the rope marks vivid against her skin even when the previously bound flesh has resumed its normal color again.

She smiles tiredly when I gather her even closer to me, and with my free hand I reach to douse the rest of the candles. For a moment we're in the dark before my eyes adjust, the moonlight streaming in through the skylights. I'm still not used to my playroom having a flat ceiling, but at least that element has remained the same.

Bella sighs contently as I get up with her in my arms and carry her across the hall into our bathroom where I set her onto her own feet again in the shower. We remain in the near darkness, just bathed in silver moon light, as we shower, kissing and touching each other lovingly while we take care of the residues of our evening entertainment.

A while later we lie snuggled against one another in our huge bed, Bella idly playing with the soft spattering of hair of what she calls my 'happy trail'.

I'm exhausted and about to drift off, but she has other intentions.

"You know, the wax was a lot less painful than I thought." I don't even crack my eyes open, just answer her with a mumble that hopefully conveys just how tired I am.

"Told you so."

"I know," she sighs emphatically, sounding unnervingly awake. "I just thought it would be worse, you know? On my pussy at least." Her fingers skim up my body until she circles my nipple playfully, evidently still not ready to call it a night. Bella touching me playfully usually means she wants more. I try to evade that terrible fate of having to make love to my beautiful fiancée by turning onto my side and drawing her along until I'm spooning her with my body. She just sees that as an invitation and starts rubbing her ass against my crotch, and of course my traitorous cock never sleeps.

I groan and try to pull my hips away from her, but she turns in my arms, and seconds later I find myself on my back, Bella straddling me.

"Do you really think you can get me that worked up and leave it at that three minutes of an excuse for fucking?" she taunts me as she grabs my cock and slides it between her pussy lips, teasing her clit

before she pushes herself down on me. We both groan in unison, and I see that my quest for sleep is really to be abandoned.

“Excuse for fucking, huh?”

Her grin broadens.

“Come on, three minutes, what do you call that? I don't care if you're tired, if you don't satisfy my needs in the playroom, you better do it here!” God, I love it when she's all demanding, like now when she's smirking down at me and starting to roll her hips slowly against mine. My hands run over her thighs up to her waist, but she'll have none of that, grabbing my wrists and pushing them into the pillow next to my head as she leans over my body.

I grin up at her, not even trying to shake her off, and instead crane my neck so that I can suck her nipple into my mouth. Bella laughs throatily, then moans as she feels my teeth worrying her nipple slightly.

“I love it when you do that,” she tells me, but when I try to extricate my hands from hers, she just squeezes my wrists harder. “No, no, you had your fun tormenting my poor boobs! I'm still all tender, so you better be nice to them!”

I suck a little harder until she moans again before I let go and show her other nipple the same attention. Her sweet moans urge me on, and before long I'm pushing my hips up to meet hers, but letting her pick the pace. My lips then travel on as I kiss and lick every part of her chest that I can reach.

Bella shifts her body anew and I grunt when I can no longer nuzzle into the promised land of her tits, but then her lips find mine, and I don't care anymore. She lowers herself onto my chest until I'm carrying her whole weight, her tits pressed against me now. Her hands let go of my wrists and her fingers run through my hair, idly playing with my locks before she tugs on them hard. I groan in mock protest, before I reach down and slap her ass playfully. Bella grunts and deepens the kiss, making me forget what I wanted to do. My hands remain on her ass, pushing her against my thrusts, all tiredness swept away.

Then she goes rigid and throws her head back, letting me see the beatific look on her face as she climaxes, again. I let go, a few more thrusts into her and I come deep inside of her. Bella sags back down onto me and I hug her close as I kiss her jaw softly.

“Better now?” I finally break the silence.

She chuckles. “Somewhat.”

“Somewhat? Do I really have to get up and bend you over the living room couch and fuck you into oblivion?”

“Okay, you win, I'm satisfied. For now.”

I laugh as I hug her closer, then turn around to spoon her once again.

Maybe I'll get lucky and she'll leave me be now.

I'm without a doubt the happiest man alive.

Chapter 3

Waking up with Bella next to me, still asleep with her mouth slightly open – my new favorite sight.

Or not quite so new, considering that since we hooked up she's been sleeping in my bed whenever there was a chance that I would use it during the night at some point, but I think it will never lose its novelty. I can spend hours gazing at her, although I don't tell her, because she'll think it's creepy. I don't intend to stop doing it any time soon though.

The shrilling of her alarm clock breaks my Bella watching meditation, and I spend the next ten minutes kissing and groping her. At first she is still grumpy because she has to get up, then she protests, but it doesn't take much to persuade her to give in to me.

Too bad that I don't realize that she really means it when she tells me that she has to leave in fifteen minutes once she finally escapes my grasp and runs into the bathroom, so I find myself sitting alone in the kitchen for breakfast. I decide to cut my losses and take my bowl of cereal outside onto the terrace, and on second thought fetch the OJ carton, too. It's only half the fun drinking it when Bella can't catch me, but at least I can claim consistency with my rebellious action.

I love our new condo. Close to the bay, in walking distance from Bella's job, only ten minutes commute to the hospital. The lower floor is pretty much one huge room, with picture windows that open onto the terrace on one side. If we decide to have kids, we'll have to move again, but for the moment it's perfect.

Bella wanted to move, and I didn't protest for a second. Best decision ever.

There are just too many memories I want to forget in the old house, and I'm sure she's not doing better in that aspect.

Esme found it for us, and for once in my life I'm happy my mom meddled.

She never admits it, but I'm pretty sure that she's been looking for something ever since she heard of my word vomit proposal. The tour with the realtor she dragged me along on I will probably never forget. Her astute, “My son likes to bang on things so we need something with good sound proofing” made me keel over laughing. Not that I really care what the realtor thinks. The previous owner was drummer in a band, and I'm sure we'll never exceed those noise levels.

Unless I spank Bella outside on the terrace, which I think I'm going to do next weekend. I know how much she likes to whimper, moan, and cry out when I bend her over my knee, should be interesting to see what she'll do when she has to stay silent.

Of course now my cock is unbearably hard, but I keep myself from wanking out here. Even I have limits of what I'll do, and without Bella indecent behavior is only half the fun.

When I'm done munching my Frosted Flakes, I take the used dish inside and leave it in the dish washer before I dress and leave the house. I'm early for my shift, with half an hour to spare, so I drop by Beth's for a coffee and a quick chat.

Just my luck that Beth isn't manning the counter, and I groan inwardly as Raven perks up when she sees me come inside. I have to admit, she's attractive, and if she weren't riding the Goth wave a little too hard, and wasn't working for Beth, I might have hit that in times of need, but as it is I try to limit conversations with her to an absolute minimum.

Raven knows what I am, and that's the only reason she's trying to follow me around like a fawning little fangirl. She's not really into BDSM, but apparently her world view dictates that she find herself some asshole who consistently ignores or abuses her. I've never given her any reason to believe that I'm even moderately interested in her, but she's persistent.

Unless Beth discourages her, I don't think she'll ever give up. But at least that keeps her from falling for that aforementioned kind of guy, so I suffer my lot, mostly, in silence.

“Master Edward, it's so good to welcome you back to our humble establishment,” she drawls, batting her black rimmed eyes at me.

I can't help it, I smirk, because seriously, I'm standing here in my old Nikes and Scrubs, it doesn't get any farther from your stereotypical Mean Dom look. And Bella must be the only one I ever encountered who gets that randy look on her face when she sees me in scrubs. Not that I mind her scrubs fetish, I mean who protests getting attacked by their girlfriend the moment they come home, but I really don't see the appeal.

Sadly, Raven takes my involuntary mirth as a sign, and dons an even more flirtatious look as she leans towards me over the counter. She's tall and reed thin, so the move exposes a sliver of skin on her lower back as the silk corset she's wearing rides up. I tell myself again that in fact I'd never have *hit* that, as in spanking, as she's just too frail. Nothing against skinny women, but I like to dig my fingers into some ass, and not have to worry if I'll bruise myself on those hip bones.

“Will you come to the play party in three weeks? Mistress Beth will be sending out invitations soon, but I thought it more prudent to ask you firsthand, Sir.”

Again I have to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. It's sentences like that that always kill me. Her boss, who she knows is my close friend, and a Domme, is inviting people, but *she* is asking me to come? If she really were all about protocol, she would never do that. Or look me in the eye, for that matter. Not that I give a shit about that, but Raven is as fake as the flunkies get.

“Thank you, Raven, I don't know yet if we have time, I'll have to ask Bella first. Maybe we'll show up.”

As expected, my answer takes all the wind from her sails. Mentioning the fact that I have a *fiancée* always does, and the notion that I even consider asking her first must be among the most unthinkable things for Raven.

Thankfully, Beth's cheery voice keeps me from adding something sarcastic that might actually hurt the poor girl, and I turn with a smile to greet my dear friend.

“Eddie, so nice of you to drop by again!”

I snort, and after hugging Beth, I chuckle.

“So good to see you again, *Bethany*! I'm so sorry I couldn't make it sooner, but you know how it is, real life gets in the way.” Her murderous glare at using her full name actually makes me blanch a little, and I have to remind myself that I'm no longer her sub. I should also stay away from her playroom for the next few weeks, because I know she can be slow to forgive. Still, calling me *Eddie* of all things has to be met with equal nastiness.

Her grin at seeing me go white is as bright as ever, and after a moment it also reaches her eyes.

“I know, I know, busy times when it's been months since you showed up at any of our parties. Or even the Sunday munch. If I didn't know better I'd think you're trying to hide Bella from us!”

Raven is still eavesdropping, although she's cut her flirtatious stretching to a minimum. Beth isn't happy when she's flirting with the customers, so she only does it behind her back. I have no doubt that Beth knows, but she's a more lenient boss than Mistress.

“Yeah, about that,” I start, then nod towards the café area of the shop.

“Why don't we talk about that over a nice shot of espresso? I'm still uncaffeinated, and cannot be held responsible for anything I say.” Beth snorts but leads the way, leaving me to nod at Raven again and follow her. We're alone as none of the browsing customers have settled down for snacks or drinks yet, and Beth mans the coffee maker herself. I'm sure she wants to spite me when she hands me my coffee with cream, no sugar, but I ignore her smirk. We sit down and both savor the delicious coffee, before she steers the conversation back to the previous topic.

“So my ever persistent employee already told you of the play party?”

“Yup.”

“You coming?”

“As I told her, have to ask the Missus first.”

Beth rolls her eyes at me, but her smile is friendly. “You're so pussy whipped, you know that?”

I grin at her in answer, but wisely hold my tongue. Beth takes that with a theatrical sigh, but I can see that she clearly approves.

“You know, sometimes I wonder where you'll end up with the balance shift between the two of you. Last time Bella clearly liked having your ass.” Of course the memory makes my cock stir, but I will my boner away quickly. Beth wouldn't approve, and if anything, I feel the utmost respect towards her.

“I guess she did. Not that I'm protesting.”

Her chuckle is bordering on nasty, and she regards me with mirth filled eyes over the rim of her cup.

“I wonder what you'd do if Bella decides one day that she likes bossing you around more than bending to your will.”

Bending to my will, my ass, since my colossal mess-up Bella hasn't done any bending of any sort that didn't come straight from her heart. As it should be, I have to admit, but sometimes I miss the times when I had to entice her into doing something that clearly scandalized her.

“If she wants it, I'll gladly spend the rest of my days kissing her feet.” Which she wouldn't approve of, because her feet are still a hard limit. I should find out why, as it sometimes peeves me that she doesn't let me suck on her toes when she's fresh out of the shower, but *that* view usually makes me want to suck on something else.

“Really?” Beth sounds moderately surprised. I nod.

“And what if she decides to never nurture that slight dominant streak of hers?”

“Then I'll gladly have her spend the rest of her life at my feet.” Both scenarios seem equally unlikely to me, and I wouldn't even want Bella to be more submissive than she is now. A little time outside the playroom might be fun sometimes, but the way she was behaving at the beginning made me realize that we *both* are ill-suited for anything going even vaguely towards 24/7. I like being in control, but I can't take responsibility for both of us.

“What are you thinking that makes you frown like you just bit into a slice of lime? Don't worry, I'm sure Bella'll be always happy to spank you if you just ask her enough.”

I sigh and shake my head, trying to disperse the unease that always grips me at the thought of screwing things up again, this time for good.

“I'm sure she wouldn't need a lot of persuasion. Speaking of which, I need your help.”

Beth sends me a pointed look because I've evaded her question, but she nods for me to go on. “Sure.”

“As you well know, her birthday's in a month, and I need to get some things without letting her know what I'm up to.”

“Don't worry, I won't rat you out if you're concerned about that.” I laugh at her comment, although I don't fully believe her. I'm happy that after four years of underlying resentment towards the girl who I've always been in love with, Beth has changed her attitude quickly after meeting Bella, but now they've joined ranks against me. The irony of that doesn't escape me, that now my former Domme and current sub are best buds, but at least Bella has someone to talk to. Even if I feel that Beth should be on *my* side, always.

“I don't think she'd listen to you, my girl likes surprises. Although not much of a surprise there as

she'd be terribly disappointed if I didn't make good on my promise.”

Beth's laugh has a clearly taunting note.

“Edward, really, a vibrating, remote controlled butt plug and a corset?

You're a hopeless sap, you know that?”

That doesn't deserve an answer, so I try to ignore her nasty grin.

“And a romantic weekend getaway in the mountains, honey moon cabin package.”

Of course the official part of my present fuels her amusement further.

“Cabin, getaway, and mountains means a hut in the woods where no one can hear her scream, right?”

My snort confirms my ulterior motives.

“I asked Bella's mom what she thought of that, and I'm now officially accepted as perfect son-in-law material. I have no idea how you always come up with such abstruse scenarios!”

“Because that's what I would think of first, and in this aspect we're very much alike, you and me.”

We share a smile before she goes on.

“So what about do you need my help? Sounds like you have everything planned already.”

“More or less,” I nod. “I already have everything except the corset.” Beth frowns at me for a moment. “You know that you need her measurements for that? Not like the slapstick comedy grope move where the lusty husband walks into the lingerie shop and shamelessly asks the shop assistant to model half of their matching sets because he can't decide what to buy his frigid wife who'll never wear it anyway? Although, if *you*'d walk into Victoria's Secret, the skanks would likely fall over themselves to offer you a cat walk show.”

I make a face, and Beth laughs loud enough that Raven sticks her head in to see what is so funny.

“I really don't know why you constantly have to shove my face in the fact that for whatever reason, women want to throw themselves at me. I don't even do anything to make them think I'd want them! Even before I had Bella I've never been interested.”

Which made bar hopping with Jazz a real pain in the ass, always. You'd think that seeing me reject ten skanks in a row would make the eleventh look for a different target, but no. And I really don't want to think about that at the moment. Or ever.

Beth saves me from having to bash my head against the table by redirecting our conversation.

“So, corset. Not quite your field of expertise.”

I shake my head, laughing.

“I just know how to get her in and out of one. But I know that you have a thing for anything tight and restricting, so I'm coming here begging for your help.”

“Begging, huh?”

“You know what I mean.”

The mirth in her look tells me she knows *exactly* what I'm talking about, which is more than I'd admit right now. If she'd let me, I wouldn't let Bella leave the bedroom without wearing a corset ever again. At least for anything involving sex.

“What do you have in mind? I vaguely remember that you were taunting her with having her wear it underneath her clothes at the birthday party with her parents.”

I nod, but I know that's a bad idea. I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her, and as much as Charlie tolerates Bella's choice to be with me, I don't think it's wise to take PDA to that level in front of him.

“Actually, I'm planning on getting her two. I mean I can't very well send her over to you for measuring and expect her not to know why you need those details, but I don't think she'd expect me to shamelessly abuse the situation like that.”

Beth chuckles, although I'm not sure if she approves of my plan. “Okay, two. The question remains the same, what do you have in mind?”

“For her birthday present I thought about some less restricting, shorter one, you know like the satin underbust corsets that also made it into the H&M racks?”

“You mean the fake, 'I'm so hip because I wear a corset' ones?” I grin at her disapproving tone.

“Exactly, only a real one. Just short. Maybe one that she can wear to work, too, over a blouse. Nothing that restricts her too much, but still keeps her in the right mind frame.”

“Mind frame, huh? You know, many women just like wearing corsets because they make them feel more feminine, or because they like the added support.”

“Oh, sure, like you never think of anything remotely sexual when you let Gerard help you tighten the laces?”

For a moment she sends me that look that means that she'd dearly like to spank me for that remark.

“I think it would be a disservice to him if it wouldn't turn me on when my slave touches me.”

“And what makes you think that Bella's any different when *I* help her with her corset and send her off to work with a whispered promise to have her ride me hard before I help her back out of it again?” Beth smiles, pacified again.

“Touché.”

“And I won't make her wear the corset if she doesn't like it. But I know she's been looking at some online, so I don't think that will happen.”

“She showed you?”

I shake my head, and steel myself for the tongue lashing that will inevitably follow now.”

“No, it came up in her browser history.”

Beth's glare is deadly.

“Tell me you did *not* go through her computer.” Sighing, I shake my head.

“I was just checking my emails, too lazy to get my own laptop, while Bella was upstairs getting ready for work. I only peeked at the last visited links in the URL bar.”

“Accidentally violating her privacy, wow, one of these days I'll actually believe you when you tell me something 'just happened'.” Her scorn grates but I can't really say anything to defend myself. We both know she's not referring to Bella's visited links, or some minor slip in the playroom.

“That won't happen again.”

“You sure? Because the way you're in denial and shut down when someone even mentions Jasper's name, I'd say you're trying too hard to make it seem like you're over everything.”

“Beth, that's enough.”

I know I'm pretty much confirming her suspicion with my sharp response, even though it's not true, but I can't even *think* about him without losing it, let alone discuss what happened. Not even with her.

“You know how it is with denial. It's like with diets. First you don't dare to eat a single piece of chocolate, and when you snap, you devour the whole bar and lick the foil clean.”

I don't know what's worse, her taunting voice or the way she looks at me, her eyes narrowed but her gaze intense.

“You know what Bella means to me. She's everything to me. It's not like I'm missing anything when I'm with her.”

And I won't, ever, change my mind, I'm sure of that. This is my one chance of forgiveness, and I'm not going to ruin it all just because some very small part of me might yearn for a little variety sometimes -

I snap myself out of it before my train of thought can run any further. I'm not angry at Beth, I'm angry at myself, but she still snorts at the face I must be making.

“Relax. Just rattling your cage a little, no need to snap my head off.” We both know that she did a lot more than that, but since she's willing to let it slide, I don't protest. Once again Beth saves the day by returning to discuss my plans.

“That's one corset, what about the other?”

Quickly ordering my thoughts, I nod at the other room where Raven is doubtlessly still trying to listen in on our conversation.

“If we want to go to a play party, Bella needs something to wear. As much as I love having her naked, I don't think she'd appreciate showing up at a party in just a leather collar.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Black leather, high, you know, like the ones that lift and squish her breasts together? And have the bottom down to her hips. With knee high boots and a short skirt she should feel dressed enough, but if she wants to do more than chat and observe, I can still do a lot to her without having to peel her out of the corset.”

Beth nods her approval.

“Sounds good to me. So you think we'll see you in three weeks? It would be the ideal occasion, just a few people, most of whom she already knows, no big deal. Charlotte and Peter already said they'd come, I'm sure Charlotte will be happy to keep Bella company the whole evening long after they're done with their shibari demo.”

“Like I'd have anything else to do than keep Bella company?” Now her smirk is as nasty as it gets.

“No, but knowing you, you'll try to talk her into doing something, even if it's just a quick blow job outside. I'm sure Bella will be grateful if Charlotte's around to run interference so you won't get too pesky.”

“Like I'd do that.”

“Don't even bother denying it. I know that look on your face. Bella in a real, tight corset, I wonder if I shouldn't call her before and ask her if she wants to dress up here, or else it's likely you won't even make it into the car.” That might just be true. I wonder for a moment if I should surprise her with the corset, or have her try it on a day or two in advance. Then we'd have all the time in the world for me to get used to her wearing it.

And at that point my cock is rock hard again. Fuck.

We keep talking about this and that for a while longer, and gradually the monster in my pants falls asleep again. Time flies, and I have to hurry to make my shift, but before I can take my leave, Beth

holds me back. I eye her askance, and the serious look on her face makes me grow cold.

“You need to talk with someone. I understand if you don't want to talk with Bella, although I'm sure she'd appreciate you coming to her. But just denying anything happened only makes things worse.” For a moment I'm ashamed that we even need to have this conversation, but then the low simmering resentment is back.

“Do you really think so little of me that you expect me to randomly jump some guy again when the itch gets too strong?”

She scoffs, and I'm insanely relieved when I see that it's true derision.

“No, of course not, and I don't even expect you to jump Jazz should the opportunity ever arrive. Edward, I'm not questioning your sincerity, or your conviction. And I'm not here to make it all better, for you. But just think for a moment how Bella must feel. Whatever you feel, she's still friends with Jasper, and I know you two spend time with him and Alice. Don't you think that it kills her every time she has to sit next to you while you ooze resentment because she once again made you come along. Your self-doubt and misgivings are a festering wound that you need to heal for her sake, if not for your own. You can't just wait for it to go away, because, surprise, it won't.”

I sigh and rub the bridge of my nose. She's right. Of course she is, she's Beth. I hate it when she reads me like I'm an open book, but then she's stuck with me through the second most horrible time in my life, when Tanya discarded me like a used rag. Not even Bella knows me as well as Beth does. I hope that will change one day, but that's not a topic that I can freely discuss with Bella.

Beth judges my silence right, and she briefly hugs me before she steps away, dismissing me.

“Go save some lives. And think about what I've said. Play party, munch, talking. Of course you can go see a shrink, too, but you know I'm a lot cheaper, and you don't have to tell me first that you're a not-quite-so-closet pervert, I already know.”

I nod and mumble a quick thank you that sounds more ungrateful than she deserves. Because I *am* grateful, but the fact remains, this is something I have to get over myself. I can't always rely on someone else when Bella needs me strong and confident.

Chapter 4

It's already pitch black outside when I finally get home, once again exhausted. Tonight I'm lucky, the heavenly scents of a freshly prepared meal already greet me when I open the door to our condo.

I find Bella at the stove, stirring some sauce or other. She smiles at me when I hug her from behind, burying my face in her hair until she is all I can smell. I try to be as pesky as possible and steal a kiss from her, but she laughs and gives me a peck on the nose before she tells me to shower as I'm apparently reeking of antiseptic. Grumbling, I dash up into the bathroom to take care of that, and by the time I'm back, the pasta is already waiting for me on the table.

We eat in companionable silence while we watch the evening news, and once we're done I flop down on the couch and do some channel surfing while Bella is working on one of her articles, her laptop balanced on her thighs. Some re-runs of *Miami Vice* keep me occupied for a while, but before long I'm getting bored.

It's weird how bland and normal our evenings are, more often than not. Just like any other couple in the city. We work, we come home, we eat, we watch TV, and maybe we even have sex before we go to sleep, or not. I used to laugh at Emmett when he told me that he really enjoys just being home with Rose, just spend time together. Now I'm exactly as much of a sap as he is. I can lie here forever and watch Bella as she nibbles on her bottom lip while she clicks through some articles, then types like a fury for a while before she goes back to scanning her source material. I wish I didn't have night shifts at least twice a week, so I could spend every evening with her like that.

Then again the way her tongue runs over her lip pushes the exhaustion right out of my mind, and if I have to stare at the bit of fabric that she insists is called underwear, that is peeking out above the waistband of her sweats, I'm going inside.

For some reason she doesn't react when I push myself off the couch and crawl over to her, then bend my head to catch the side of the thong between my teeth. I tug until I'm sure that excuse for panties must bite into her flesh on the other side, before I let go, the elastic snapping right back into her hip. When she still doesn't even flinch I repeat my approach, and end it with a wet kiss onto her soft skin.

“Is there something you would like to tell me with that, or are you just being a pain in the ass?”

Bella glances down at me after she closes her laptop and sets it down on the table, her eyebrows raised. I push myself closer to her so that I can rest my head on her thigh, and grin up at her.

“Oh I'd love to be a pain in your ass, shall I get the lube?” Bella rolls her eyes at me, but the way her smile lights up her face just makes me want to stay here with her like this forever.

“Has someone told you before that your humor lacks any kind of subtlety?”

“I think you mentioned something like that before.” She squeals when I push my face against her stomach and dab my tongue into her belly button, but she doesn't seem to mind me pulling her tank top

up her chest.

“Stop it! I still have to finish my column; I have to send it to Ben for approval first thing in the morning!”

I mumble a string of profanities into her warm skin in between messy kisses, but stop when she pushes lightly on my shoulders.

“Edward, I really mean it. Twenty minutes, then I'm all yours, okay?” I really don't want to move, but I can't resist her when she smiles like this.

After a last kiss on her stomach I retreat to the other end of the couch again, and try to focus on the show. I just close my eyes for a moment, but I must have dozed off, as the TV is off and the lights are dimmed when I open them again. I'm instantly grumpy that my insane job has once again cost me a nice evening romp on the couch, but then I feel warm lips running over my abs and, belatedly, look down.

During my slumber one of my legs must have slipped off the couch, and now Bella is kneeling on the floor before me, her hands on my thighs while she's kissing wet lines down my lower stomach. When she feels me stir, she briefly looks up and grins at me before she goes back to tickling me with her tongue.

I'm still wondering if I should draw her back up onto the sofa, when she reaches into my boxer briefs, and the next moment her mouth is hot and wet around my cock. I groan loudly and sink back onto the couch, my dick screaming at me not to interrupt her. Not that I intend to. Her lips and tongue just feel too good on me.

She hums contently when I groan in bliss, which of course makes me even harder. Her hand wraps around my cock and she starts stroking me in turn with sucking, and I'm in heaven. Her hair tickles my thigh and I brush it away, but my fingers remain in her soft tresses – not holding her head or anything, but just feeling the silky texture on my fingertips.

Within minutes she has me groaning and panting in pleasure and the urge to hold her in place and fuck her mouth resurfaces but, for once, I let her set the pace and am content with enjoying myself and watching her work.

I'm used to my subs knowing how to please me that way, but the fact that Bella really enjoys fellatio is indescribable. Even now her eyes are dark with lust as she gazes up at me, before she intensifies her efforts until she wears down my restraint.

I come in her mouth with a long drawn out moan, my orgasm that much stronger when she takes all of me in when she feels me coming, her lips sealed around the base of my cock. When I'm spent she keeps licking at my head long after all the jizz is cleaned up, and for a moment, I wonder if I can get it up again soon. I'm even a little disappointed when Bella pushes my dick back into my underwear, but then she's crawling onto me, and I don't really care anymore.

My hands are at the back of her head when I draw her close to me, hungrily kissing her mouth. She tastes all like her with just a trace of my spunk and I decide that I want to spend the rest of the night just exploring her mouth.

Bella moans against my lips contently while her fingers knead my sides, and long before I'm ready to let her go, she pulls away and rests her head on my shoulder.

“Thought that would wake you up again.”

I laugh as I stroke her back gently.

“You always have that effect on me.” I kiss her hair, then add, “Sorry that I fell asleep. Long day.”

“Don't worry; at least I don't have to feel bad that my promised half hour turned out to be two hours. Plus, I love watching you sleep. You make the cutest of noises when I tickle your neck.”

Her words make me laugh and I would smack her ass for that if I weren't so languid right now. I still feel like I should do *something* so I let my fingers drift lower and into the back of her sweats. That thong is really just a thin string of fabric that disappears between her ass cheeks and I bother myself with following its path for a while until I slip my fingers underneath it to caress her skin. Bella's warm breath against my neck picks up when I skim lower but, before I can reach any vital parts of her anatomy, she stretches her body, not quite incidentally knocking my arm away.

“Don't start anything you don't intend to follow up on. I'm too tired to go to bed frustrated now.”

“Who says I'm just making empty promises?”

She laughs softly before she scoots back a little, straddling me as she sits down on my thighs close to my knees, smiling at me.

“You were barely awake enough to enjoy me giving you a blow job; you don't seem up to fucking my ass right now.”

I don't know if I should be offended by her words, or if she's just trying to goad me into action, but there's no fire in her eyes, so I guess she's just stating the obvious.

“I *was*, but now I'm awake, thanks to your very talented mouth.” Months ago she would have blushed, now she's just grinning at my praise.

“Well, if you're that taken by my mouth, wait until you see what my pussy can do for you.”

Of course my cock stirs at her words and I groan, and Bella chuckles at my reaction.

“Yeah, poor Edward, really, always pestered by your nympho of a girl!” I can't let that remark slide, so I grab her and push her down onto her back on the couch, crouching over her as I sneer. She laughs, and I stifle the sound by plunging my tongue into her mouth, kissing her hard and deep until laughter turns to needy moans. My fingers dig into her hips as I hold her down, then I shift my body so I can

grip the back of her neck with one hand, and push the other into her sweats.

No surprise, she's wet and her thong is soaked, and her back arches up underneath me when I drag her panties aside and thrust two of my fingers into her. Her hands push against my shoulders, urging me off her, but I'm not ready to let her go yet. So I catch her wrists with the hand that was on her neck and press them into the couch over her head, while I keep fucking her with my fingers. She's writhing underneath me now, her hips pressing against my hand, all signs of struggle gone. My thumb finds her clit, and I feel her clench around me. I speed up my efforts, and she's coming, her lips still smashed against mine.

I withdraw my fingers from her hot pussy and move off her a little, but still keep her hands pinned. Bella is panting hard, her eyes drooping closed, but open wide as she watches me lick her juices off my fingers. I love how she tastes, and for a moment I even contemplate making her come again with just my mouth. But then I remember my talk with Beth today, and decide to postpone any further attempts to make Bella scream until later.

She looks a little disappointed when I let go of her and lie down on the couch, but she's only too happy to shimmy around until she's partly lying on my chest. We kiss some more, but I think she feels that my heart's no longer fully into it.

“Why do I think that the next words out of your mouth are the ominous 'we need to talk'?”

I laugh at the suspicion in her voice and gently kiss her again to make sure that my intentions are not driven by any sense of guilt or unease.

“You know me too well, Swan.”

“Oh, now we're on last name basis, gotta be something important.”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

I shrug and pull her even closer, my hands back in her hair.

“How important you want it to be.”

“Just spit it out, Cullen, before I die of anticipation here.” I laugh as she's all relaxed against me, a warm, content body stretched alongside my own.

“I talked to Beth today.”

“And?”

“And she gave me shit because I'm keeping you from her and the others.

Apparently. Not that I think I ever actively did that, but, you know.” Bella's chuckling into my chest,

before she turns her head and places a gentle kiss onto my chin.

“I'm all yours, you know? And yours to keep away from anyone else.” My heart clenches at her words, and that twisted mix of melancholy and endless happiness zooms through me. Just mine, always mine, just as I'm hers.

Of course I can't go all sappy on her, even though I partly want to, but she's in a playful mood now that she's satisfied, and I don't really want her to tease me for spilling my guts.

“Oh, you are, but wanna know what's even more fun than locking you up here and having my wicked way with you? Parading you in front of others and showing them firsthand what they are missing, and what I have every day.”

She's silent for a moment, and I wonder what she thinks I'm implying here.

I'm close to panicking when she frowns for a second, but then her forehead is smooth again, a light smile on her lips.

“What is this all about?”

I decide to just spill it, I can always tease her tomorrow, right now I should go easy on her if I want her to be comfortable with the idea.

“Beth is having a play party in three weeks. Wanna go there with me?” I expect the frown to come back, but Bella's smile stays, even though she hesitates for a little while.

“I guess.”

“You guess? Doesn't sound too good.”

Now she's sneering, but it's a playful sneer.

“Seriously, you, me, a room full of people who're likely to be okay with any kind of PDA you come up with, I wonder if I'll get brain damage from blushing.”

Her accusation makes me laugh, but I hold myself back after a moment when Bella in fact scowls at me. I bring my hands up in a defensive gesture, trying to pacify her as I mimic taking an oath.

“I solemnly swear, I will behave myself and only grope you when you want me to.”

“See, that's the problem!”

“What's the problem?”

She sighs, exasperated.

“Edward, I always *want* you to grope me! Well, maybe not in front of your parents, but you know

what I mean. I protest, of course, because that's what I do, but we both know that I'm terribly easy to persuade that it's a good thing when you have your hand inside my pants! Oh, and that solemnly swearing I only believe when you end that sentence with 'I'm up to no good'."

I roll my eyes at her and grumble something under my breath about pop culture references, but she just looks too cute, all agitated from her accusation. She's right, of course, but I'm trying to be good and really mean it.

"Beth and Gerard will be there, and Peter and Charlotte, too, rest assured that I will behave myself just because one half of them would have my ass for being stupid, and the other would frown upon my improper behavior.

After all I have a reputation to uphold, and as much as I love to tease you, I'm not going to get banned from any community events just because I feel like biting your juicy ass in front of everyone."

For some reason my half-assed argumentation seems to work, as Bella stops frowning and snuggles closer to me.

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay, let's go to that play party. I just don't have anything to wear. And before you start, no, I'm so not going naked."

I chuckle at her decisive tone, and earn myself a badly aimed punch in the arm for that.

"Stop it, I really mean it! And don't tell me you didn't think of that already, I know you better than that!"

Of course she does, and I'm wisely keeping my tongue.

"We'll find something for you to wear, I'm sure. But I thought it'd take longer for me to persuade you to come."

Bella sighs, the sound coming out with the wariness I've been expecting.

"Look, of course I'm a little anxious, and I'm sure that the closer the day of the party is, the more I will be nervous and all, but I know that there's no need for me to fret over this. I trust you, even when I accuse you of being a mean bastard. I know that you wouldn't ask me to go there with you if you'd think I would resent it. And I know that if I change my mind, or if I just don't like it, we'll leave."

Then she looks up, a dirty smile forming on those luscious lips.

"And after all, it's in Beth's playroom, right? Where I fucked your ass the last time we were there, actually *both* times we were there. I don't think I have any need to be afraid of going there again."

Now my cock is definitely awake, and she feels it pressing into her stomach, causing her smile to turn into a veritable smirk.

“I guess not.”

We could keep talking about this for a while longer, but I decide that I'd rather kiss her now, and she doesn't protest when I do exactly that. At first she's pliable enough, but then she pushes herself into a crouching position over me and squeezes my cock hard while her teeth sink into my lip.

“Speaking of which, I think I should call Beth tomorrow if maybe she'd like to play with us again. You've been a horny bastard of late, always pestering me in the morning; maybe I should put you in your place again.” Her hand squeezes my dick even more until I groan, but the moment her grip eases up on me, I jerk my hips up, hoping that she won't stop there.

Bella looks down at her hand on my cock before her eyes turn to my face again, and I grow even harder when there's no hesitation in them, no flicker of doubt.

“I don't think we'll need Beth for that, really,” I offer when she doesn't continue. Bella frowns a little and I feel her fingers ease up on me, and my cock immediately protests. So I reach up and draw her face close to mine, kissing her passionately to show her that I trust her, and want her to trust herself.

I'm a little disappointed when she sits down on my legs again but, as her hand is still on my cock, not all hope is lost.

“I don't know if that's a good idea,” she admits, but just when I want to launch into my pep talk she runs the thumb over her other hand over the head of my cock, teasing, toying with me.

My eyes close on their own account and I groan, but before I can completely lose my thought I force myself to concentrate on her, and not on what she's doing.

“Why not?”

“I really don't know how to do it. How to set up a scene, I mean.”

“You did really well last time with Beth, if I remember correctly.” Bella snorts. “Exactly. With Beth. I mostly rambled on about what I wanted to do in general, but she provided all the details, and how we should set things up, heighten expectations and all that.”

“I'm sure you'll do just fine on your own -” I cut off when I feel her nails run up the length of my shaft, basically wiping my brain for a few seconds. She really doesn't know what she's doing to me, or else she wouldn't think for a second that she could do anything wrong.

“Bella, trust me, you can do it if you want to.” She stops for a moment, grinning at my needy pants, and I try to rally what's left of my mind to go on. “And you don't have to do the planning alone; I'll help you if you want me to.”

“You would?”

I'm a little hurt that she sounds so surprised.

“Of course I would, why shouldn't I? No offense, but my playroom, my gear, I should know how to use it all and explain and help you there. With everything.”

“But then you'll know what I'm up to!”

“And?”

She looks baffled for a moment, but then considers my offer in earnest.

“Okay. But I want something in return.”

Anything. Really anything. But she should know that she can always ask anything of me.

“Sure, what?”

Her smile is triumphant now.

“I want in on the scene planning when I'm subbing, too.” That surprises me a little as she's never asked that of me before, but it really shouldn't as we've just had the exact same point with our roles reversed. Before I can do more than nod, she explains further.

“Like, I'd like you to explain to me how you do that for anything you're up to this week. Where you get your ideas from, how you decide what to do to me, what toys to use, how to tie me up, when you want to play, everything.

Maybe we can discuss some of that, too. Maybe even try something new, I mean the wax play was fun, I'm sure there are some other things you've been itching to do but we never got round to actually trying them. And after this week I'll do some research, and we can sit down and I can tell you what I come up with for you. You just help me work out the details and how-tos. How does that sound?”

Like I've died and gone to heaven, or maybe that's hell considering what we're talking about, anyway, I'm in paradise.

“Have I told you of late how much I love you?”

She grins at my emphatic words and leans down to kiss me, but stops before our lips come even close. I try to crane my neck and close the distance, but then she's squeezing my cock again and I fall back into the cushions of the couch.

“You sure that's not just your cock talking?” she teases me.

“I *am* pretty sure that's my heart and mind, because seriously, my cock's concerned with other things right now!”

“Oh, really? Like what?”

“Like begging you not to stop!”

Her smile brightens, and she licks her lips as she looks down at the concerned piece of me.

“I think I should be gracious and grant your cock that attention. But you're not getting away so easily, mister.”

I'm surprised when she lets go of me and gets up, but my apprehension is gone when she steps out of her sweats and thong, and gets back onto the couch, her knees left and right of my head while she's facing my legs.

“Be a good boy and show my pussy some love, will you?” I don't really need the incentive as my hands are already on her thighs, spreading them wider as I pull her down towards me. Bella sighs contently as I lick up and down her wet pussy lips, before I suck on her clit. Her hand squeezes my cock hard in what I think is some kind of involuntary reaction, but then she's pumping me while her other hand is gripping my balls none to gently. Her hips buck and she's rubbing herself all over my face, but I couldn't care less.

We're both excited as hell, and I make her come even before I shoot my load all over my stomach, a few minutes later. It doesn't happen often that she gives me a hand job, and I really don't care; just wipe myself clean with my t-shirt. Bella looks exceptionally pleased with herself as we make our way upstairs, where we shower together before we fall into our bed.

She's asleep in minutes, lying half on my shoulder and chest, and I spend nearly an hour just staring at her beautiful face, tired but unable to fall sleep myself. My thoughts return to my conversation with Beth, and I want to deny that she was right, that I have to do something to make sure that I don't keep dragging on Bella's happiness like I used to, inadvertently.

Because for her, I'd simply do anything.

Chapter 5

Yesterday it all sounded so perfect. Why then am I shitting my pants today?

It's not like I haven't done any joint scene planning before. Beth and Peter both helped me when I had my first sub, and I've always talked everything through in detail with Charlotte when she let me tie her up. Over the years I've been doing it over and over again with subs I've only played with for a scene or two. Why the anxiety now?

It's not even a rational fear, just a feeling in my gut. As if Bella would laugh at me if I say something stupid. It's ridiculous, really, but it won't go away, as much as I try to get a grip on myself.

I spent the whole day fretting over what to tell her, but by the time I'm home again, I still haven't come up with an idea that I think is worthy of the occasion. It suddenly seems as if we've done everything at least five times already, and try as I might, nothing really new comes to my mind. Bella is of course ecstatic to have me home again, jumping into my arms and kissing my whole face before I'm even through the door. I don't want to disappoint her with being the least inventive guy in the world, but I don't see how she won't frown at how little I have come up with.

We've both already eaten dinner, so it's just a matter of getting some coffee, and we sit down on the couch. More precisely, I sit down on the couch and Bella settles on my thighs, facing me. Of course having her straddle me makes me overtly aware that I didn't find the time today to jerk off in the toilet after spending my lunch break fantasizing about the many ways I could tie her up, always a bad idea, that.

“So, you ready for our talk?”

I'm always ready for you, Bella, and when you look at me like that, something else than 'talking' comes to mind.

I have no idea where I find the self-restraint to keep my hands on the couch, as I really want to touch her, but she looks all cute in her eagerness, and I tell myself I can always fuck her later. Probably have to or else I will explode, and not just in my pants.

“I guess I am. So what do you wanna know?”

Bella nibbles on her bottom lip, and I so want to drag it from between her teeth with my own, but instead take a sip of my coffee. I know this will get a lot worse before it gets better, and I try to keep a tight grip on myself.

'Tight grip' just reminds me of what she did to me yesterday, and my problem grows at least an inch. Great conversation starter, really. Yeah, Bella, so I have been trying to think, but really I just have a boner, and don't you want to take care of that before we start talking of the many ways I want to have you in my playroom, so that I can ask you for a repeat performance in five minutes again?

For some reason my thoughts are not plain on my face, or else Bella is distracted, because she doesn't do any of the things she usually resorts to when she realizes that the monster in my jeans is awake and drooling for her, but instead plucks on some imaginary lint on her sleeve.

“How do you come up with ideas? I know you don't use any cheat sheets or anything like that. Although the notion cracks me up.” I try hard to concentrate on the question, but the answer doesn't exactly help my problem.

“The internet, mostly.”

“Don't tell me you watch porn online!”

I laugh, mostly at the way she scrunches up her nose.

“You know what's on my hard drive, no need to turn on the modem for that.”

Bella considers that for a moment, but once again doesn't acknowledge my 'collection'.

“If it's not porn that you're watching, what are you doing instead?”

“Research.”

“Where?”

“The shoot previews of some of the kinky sites.”

Her nose does that adorable twitching again.

“And how is that not porn?”

“It's just pictures. And some text.”

“How is something like 'and then she gets fucked hard, tied in various positions' with demonstrative pictures not porn?”

I grin up at her when I see her cheeks turn slightly red. “Why, is that a direct quote, love?”

More lip biting, and her shrug doesn't seem too convincing.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

She glares at me for a moment, but then shrugs once more. “So I went through your visited links this afternoon after Beth told me about your

'accident' the other day, and maybe got a little caught up there. So what?!" Her indignation, together with the deepening blush, just makes me laugh.

Awesome, my girl is getting turned on by snooping around the same sites as I do. I don't even mind that she did it, might have been more fun doing it together, though.

"Whether it's porn or not doesn't really matter. It's great inspirational material."

Bella is still pursing her lips, but then she lets it slide.

"Okay. Inspiration has struck, what's next?"

"Then I try to decide on a general theme. Like, what do I want to base the whole scene on? Bondage, toys, role playing, that kind of thing." She nods. "And what have you come up with for our planning?" I try to decide what I should tell her, but I know it's best to keep it simple.

As our conversation goes on, the remaining anxiety falls away and all that's left is excitement that I can share this with her.

"Two scenes. One more action driven, the other all about sensations." Bella visibly perks up. "Oh? Tell me more. Action driven one first. That sounds way dirtier."

I roll my eyes at her, but really want to kiss her for being so receptive.

"I guess it is, although probably not the way you think. If I have my say, which I guess I *do* have, seeing as I'm your Dom, you won't have too much freedom of movement in either scenario."

She makes a face in response, but the glint in her eyes doesn't go away.

"So what are you going to do with me? Tie me up?"

"I thought about trying something new that we haven't really done before to that extent. You remember that screw-on board for the padded bench that you asked me about when we were packing up the playroom for the move?"

"The one with the weird holes? You never told me what it is, exactly."

"Stocks."

I can see her thoughts running wild behind her eyes, and she cocks her head to the side, considering.

"As in medieval stocks, that thing they put people in on the town square so everyone could throw foul vegetables at them?"

The visual makes me laugh.

"Exactly, only that I won't throw anything at you." I give her a few moments to think about that,

meanwhile running my hands up and down her thighs in what I hope is a soothing gesture. A light frown mars her forehead while she contemplates my suggestion, but finally she nods, making my heart skip a beat or two in anticipation.

“Just my hands, or my neck, too? I remember there were three holes in that wood frame.”

“You decide how far you want to go, whatever you want is fine with me. We can do just your hands, so you'll be secured, but you can still move your body somewhat freely as long as you don't get off the bench. I won't lie, I'd like to secure your neck, too. Don't worry, the whole thing is padded, and the holes are large enough that you won't even feel it around your neck if you keep your head straight. But that way you're fully restrained and can't even look over your shoulder, so that whatever I do behind your back you won't know until I touch you.”

My cock definitely likes the picture of Bella's ass sticking into the air that way. She still looks a little hesitant, so I bring my hands up to cup her face, and stroke her cheeks gently.

“Just think about it for a moment. You're kneeling on the bench, your wrists and neck all secured so you can't move, can't get away. You're vulnerable, helpless, more so than ever before because the rope you can pull off, and the cuffs are not that hard to unbuckle, either, but there's no way you can open the stocks yourself, you're completely at my mercy.” I let my hands drift lower so that I'm running my fingers down to her shoulders, idly stroking over her soft skin.

“That also means that your ass is in the air, and I can run my fingers up and down your thighs, or in between. Maybe I'll even tie your ankles to the bench, spread wide to leave you completely open to me. There's really not much you can do now, I can touch you, spank you, fuck you, make you come over and over again – whatever I want to do to you.” Her lips are slightly parted by the end of my little explanation, and I can tell that I'm not the only one who's excited about the idea.

“How does that sound to you, my little minx?”

She shrugs, trying to play cool but utterly failing.

“I just don't know if I want you to fuck me while my neck is inside a rigid wooden structure, padded or not.”

Oh, she's good, still thinking straight even though she must be more than just a little aroused by now, judging from the way she is grinding herself against my legs.

“It would probably be a good idea to get your neck out of the stocks before I do that. But for fucking your mouth or having you jerk me off with your hand I think I can keep you all locked up.”

She bites her lip, and her fingers close around my forearms, making my hands still.

“And would you just fuck my mouth and pussy?”

“Probably not. I think I'd even order you to properly clean yourself beforehand, so I can do whatever I want with your ass.” Now she's squirming for real, but she doesn't veto that idea. Bella doesn't

really seem opposed to that at all, as I find out when she answers me.

“I think I really like that idea. So what was the other, sensation based scene?”

As she's already so hot and bothered, I figure I can be more daring than I thought at first.

“Remember when I blindfolded you the last time? How that heightened what you felt?”

Her nod is eager, and I hear her breath pick up. “Yes.”

“I want to do something like that again, only go a little further. You just have to trust me.”

“I always trust you.”

I'm not sure she really does, but she trusts me *enough*, and scenes like the one on my mind will hopefully further that trust.

“Good. Because I want to blindfold you, and then I want to gag you, and then I want to tie you up in a way that you can't really move anymore. I promise you, I won't leave your side, but you'll have no way of knowing what I'm up to. And even though I'll just touch you, kiss you and caress you gently, you won't see it coming, you won't anticipate anything.” I can see her unease, and I'm not really surprised by that.

“Do you really have to gag me?”

“That's the plan.”

She nods, but not too happily.

“What if I have to use my safe word? How will you know if I panic?” The answer should be obvious, but again I'm relieved that she thinks about her own safety, too.

“First off, if you panic, you squirm differently than when you're aroused, and I will definitely pay close attention to you. Second, we'll use a safe signal that doesn't involve formulating words, something like three quick grunts.

And third, I'll give you one of those toy balls that make these awful noises when you squeeze them. Don't worry, I'll be there to calm you down and release you, should you want that.”

My assurance pacifies her, but she's still uneasy.

“That's all you'll be doing, kissing and touching me? Sounds a little tame for your standards.”

And just like that, her playful nature is peeking through.

“All I would do for a first attempt. Why, want me to do more?” Bella shrugs, clearly contemplating what to say.

“I think it would be nice if you make me come, too. I mean I love it when you make me come when I'm tied up, now with the focus even more on your touch, it might feel really good if you, you know, eat me out.” I grin up at her. “Sounds good to me.”

“Okay.”

I should probably leave it at that, and be happy that I don't have to convince her of anything, but that would be too easy. I don't know why, but whenever she's this quick to comply, I feel I'm not trying hard enough.

“Do you think you might be up for a little more if we get to that, and you're feeling okay with the restriction and being blindfolded and gagged?”

“Like what?”

She's already biting her lip in anticipation again, and that drives me a wild.

“Clothes pins.”

A shudder runs through her at my words, but she doesn't immediately shake her head.

“Go on.”

“Don't worry, I won't snap them off you, or anything like that. Just put a few on your nipples and pussy lips, before I lick you. They shouldn't really hurt, but as your nipples grow hard and your labia go all puffy, the sensation will change and heighten. I'll take them off before I make you come, if you want, but either way, you won't regret it.”

Bella keeps looking deep into my eyes, and whatever she sees in there makes her nod after a few moments.

“Okay.”

Not the most emphatic answer, but the best I'm going to get, until I make her come over and over again while she screams into the gag, of course.

My cock is twitching in anticipation, and I'm starting to think that this conversation is a really bad idea if it means we have to finish it before I can drag her up into the bedroom.

“Trust me, remember?” I try to chase away the frown that's still on her face.

Bella cocks her head again, and then she's suddenly sporting a nasty smile.

“You know that I'll pay you back next week, right?” Yes, please, do your worst, we both know I'll love it. Although right now I'd rather add to the toll by having my wicked ways with her.

Out loud I leave it at a nearly derisive “Whatever,” but I can see that she isn't that easily deterred.

“It's just sad that I can't really tie you up. I think I'd really like you all stretched up and at my mercy.”

“You can use cuffs, and some leather straps.”

My answer confuses her for a moment. “How?”

I have to fight the urge to tease her, but I don't think she'd appreciate that just now.

“You said you want me all stretched up, so I guess you want me standing up? If you really want to keep me restrained, you can cuff my wrists to the pole we have in the corner of the playroom, and use some leather straps to secure the rest of my body, maybe one over my hips, another two over my thighs?”

The idea clearly appeals to her, and not for the first time I wonder if I've created a monster. One I love dearly, but still. The way things started out I'd never have thought her to find the confidence to turn the tables on me so quickly. Shit, that day under the pier I'd been so afraid of losing her for good, and now she's plotting how to go all nasty on me.

“Just how good is that for keeping you restrained? Because I really want you unable to move.” Her eyes gaze deeply into mine as she leans closer to me. “How did you put it? I want you completely helpless and vulnerable.” While she's talking, her fingers skim over my chest down to my waistband, and I'm yearning for her touch. She stops there and toys with the button of my jeans, all playful now. I try to ease my ass off the couch, but she's still sitting on my legs, so I can't really push myself against her.

“Show me how to use a flogger again next weekend? I'm not sure I remember everything from Beth's lesson.”

I nod, my mouth going dry. I really didn't expect her to ask me that, but apparently she's starting to ease up on her claim that she doesn't want to hurt me. Not that she'll do much damage either way, but I realize that she's leaving her comfort zone there.

“How long do you want to continue this conversation? Because if you keep on like this, I'm going to come in my pants.”

Bella laughs, a wonderful, throaty sound. I decide that the time for talking is over, and cuddling is so overrated sometimes.

“Why, have you something better on your mind?”

“You, bent over the back of this couch, while I fuck you hard from behind.” Her breath hitches at my suggestion, but she's apparently reluctant to give it up that easily, teasing minx that she is.

“I want to look at you. I want to feel you deep inside of me while I draw you closer with my legs. But the 'fuck me hard' part we can keep, no objection against that.”

I consider that, but really, who am I to protest? So I reach for her and draw her close to me, rubbing

my nose along her neck before I trail kisses up to her mouth. Bella moans, her fingers already in my hair, and a moment later she's tearing at my shirt. I quickly rid her of her top and bra, pausing in my effort to undress her quickly to lightly chew on her nipples. Her breathless laughter goes straight to my cock, and a second later I have her on her back on the couch, yanking her pants off before I drop my jeans and boxers.

I lean over her and she immediately wraps her arms around my neck, drawing me closer. I step between her spread legs, my cock already unbearably hard, but Bella doesn't look like she'll appreciate me teasing her for long.

While I pull her hips closer to the edge of the couch she grabs my dick, but this time I won't have any of that. Her teeth scrape along my throat and over to my shoulder while her fingers yank hard enough on my hair to hurt, fanning the stubborn resentment on that's suddenly overwhelming me.

Of course I love her, and of course I want to satisfy her needs, and the overtly dominant behavior she's displaying this week is a huge turn on, but I've simply spent too much time in Dom mode today to let her get away with that.

So I grab her around the waist and drag her off the couch and towards the kitchen table. Bella squawks indignantly, confusion plain on her face.

“What the fu-”

I clamp my hand roughly over her mouth to shut her up while I press her torso onto the table, keeping her pinned while I kick her legs apart. She's slow to comply but doesn't struggle. I lean over her and sneer, pitching my voice to a husky growl.

“Don't even think of resisting me, or I'll make you regret it. I'm going to fuck you, use you for my pleasure, and you better keep your hands flat on the table, unless you want a sound spanking beforehand?” Bella mumbles something into my hand, but I don't let go of her, instead take her meek compliance for the affirmation that it is. I know that my

'threat' of spanking her is more like a promise, but she doesn't move, so I guess she just wants to go right to the main course and bypass the appetizers.

I push my cock between her pussy lips and rub it up and down a few times, gathering some of her juices and teasing her clit along the way. Her back bows slightly but she keeps her chest and hands pressed against the table, looking straight forward at our reflection in the glass of the windows. If it wasn't raining outside I would fuck her bent over the terrace railing, but I'd rather we didn't end up with pneumonia.

A few muffled sounds come from her when I keep teasing her, she's clearly displeased, and I smirk down at her. I'm even tempted to make myself orgasm that way, and leave her hanging dry for the night. Frustration is a powerful tool, and one that I haven't really used with her until now, because I'm a hopeless sap.

The vision of Bella on her knees, frustrated and horny, begging me to just let her come nearly makes me spill my load, and I decide that I will definitely do that, if it's only for one day. I always love being the reason for why she's writhing and moaning, but taking our play time a step farther into really exerting control over her and not just aiming for her pleasure with a kinky background is a whole new turn-on for me. I don't know if she'll like it, but I have to try at least once.

But right now I have to fuck her, and make her come screaming on my cock, and that's exactly what I'm about to do.

Bella moans loudly as I push into her, savoring the sensation of her hot, wet cunt around me. I'm forcing her to stand on her tip toes, so she's tighter than usual, making this even more fun for me. I keep my hand clapped over her mouth while I start fucking her, deep and fast enough to slam her thighs and hips into the table, my other hand digging into her waist to keep her stabilized.

I'm horny as hell but today my restraint is good, and I'm not even close when I feel Bella start to shake all over with her impending orgasm. She's almost passive underneath me but clearly enjoying herself, moaning almost constantly into my palm. Our eyes meet over the reflection in the windows, and a new idea forms in my mind.

“Do you want to come while I keep fucking you like this, love?” She nods immediately, her eyes wide and pleading. I don't think it's possible, but my dick gets even harder, and I increase my pace a little more. The slapping sound of flesh on flesh is ringing though the room, and I decide that now is the time to step up the game.

The moment my hand is off her mouth Bella is panting loudly, a needy moan coming from her, but it cuts off immediately when she feels my fingers on her throat. My other hand is in her hair, drawing her head back so that I can get a better grip, but I don't tighten it as I don't really want to choke her. Yet.

I see in the way her eyes nearly pop out of her head that she knows what I'm up to, my sudden smirk making her tense up. Almost too late I tell her to come, and her whole body hurls itself into her climax. The walls of her pussy grab my cock like a vice, and I have to concentrate not to come immediately. Instead I keep slamming into her, over and over, while my fingers press gently into the column of her throat.

“Oh God, oh God!” she's crying out as a second orgasm builds up inside of her, and this time I let go when I feel her tense up.

We come together, and it's a motherfucking strong release. Just to be sure I let go of her before I can do any accidental damage, but grab onto her hips for my last, deep thrust. This just feels so unbelievably good.

I'm not yet quite down from my high when my brain kicks in, belatedly.

Fuck. I quickly check on Bella, but she seems fine, if a little banged up.

There are a few red marks where my hand has been on her waist, and I guess she'll bruise slightly where I have been pushing her thighs into the edge of the table. But from what I can see she's smiling, and her palms are still pressed into the wood.

I'm grinning like a madman as I lean over her and gently kiss her back, while my hands run down her arms until I can entwine my fingers with hers.

My lips find her mouth and I kiss her, slow and savoring her taste, before I pull her off the table and against my chest.

“You're such a good girl, I'm so proud of you.”

Bella snickers and I can really feel the change in her demeanor as she comes out of sub mode, and my snarky fiancée is back behind those chocolate brown eyes.

“You're such a bastard sometimes!”

I grin down at her and kiss her again, this time a little more emphatically.

She puts up a bit of a fight, her fists pushing against my arms, but her tongue is hungrily invading my mouth while her teeth scrape against my lips. A second later my hand is in her hair and pulling her head back almost painfully until she gasps and stops fighting me, but the challenge remains in her eyes. She's quick to rebound these days, but as long as she's equally fast to switch into sub mode, I really don't care.

“Come again?” I taunt her, my voice low and slightly threatening.

Something close to a moan escapes her, but instead of backing down she just grins at me.

“I'm not taking that back! You *are* a bastard, and you know it! Doesn't change even if you make me come like that every day! Which I would kind of welcome, although I think I'd be a lame invalid by day three.” She's grimacing and I just can't fight the laughter that's bubbling up in me, so I let go of her and kiss her again, trying to pacify her with the gesture.

She's quick to forgive, as usual, and hums into my neck as I hug her close.

“If you ask me nicely, you know I'm always happy to fuck you into oblivion in almost any kind of way.”

“Promise me you always will be?”

A rather unbidden image of a time when old age will keep us from doing just that invades my mind, but then growing old together with her doesn't scare me. We'll find a way, I'm sure of that.

“Promise. Always.”

I sweep her off her feet then and carry her upstairs, much to her delight, and we entertain ourselves

with silly ideas of how and where we could keep up that 'daily fuck into oblivion' idea all over our new home until we fall asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter 6

Another 36 hours shift, and then it's Friday, and I can finally sleep. Sleep, sleep, sleep. And sleep is even better, because I know that once I'm awake again, Bella will be home soon, and we finally have time to do the first of our planned scenes.

I know she's excited, and I definitely got the evil eye from her when I told her that she has to wait another two days until we can get there because of my insane working hours. I love her even more when she's all grumpy because something is messing with her plans. It's weirdly cute, and knowing how horny and wet she must be is like a constant reminder to me of why life is good.

After only five hours of being out cold, I'm awake again and weirdly wound up. Normally I would now set up the playroom as I have nothing else to do, but I guess as we already did the talking, Bella will appreciate it if I show her what exactly needs to be done before we can start. I spend my time watching TV, until Alice calls at three to confirm that we'll meet her and Jazz at nine downtown at the new club she's been pestering us all about.

We chat for a while, and it's nice to talk to Alice again. She won't be here for Bella's birthday as the NY fashion week starts exactly the same day, so she decided we should go out and celebrate before that. That day is, incidentally, today. I would rather have spent the evening cuddling on the couch, as I'm hoping to wear Bella out before then, but when Alice declares something, it's not like any of us can say no. Or of late none of us really dare, not even Bella.

Beth is right, I'm shutting down every time *that topic* is mentioned and I need to do something about that, but compared to Alice I'm working through my issues. Most of the time she doesn't even seem to recognize the shit that went down. For her, it's as if nothing ever happened. Can't be healthy, but I'm not the one to tell her that nothing good will come of it.

She's happy, why should I be the one to rain on her parade? That, and she keeps Jasper out of my face, no need to change that, either.

Alice has to end the call after fifteen minutes because she gets caught up in the last minute preparations, and I'm not too devastated as a short while later Bella is home. From across the room I can tell that she's giddy, and her emphatic hug and passionate kiss underline that even more. I'm laughing when she's all over me, but I finally extricate myself from her as I know that we'll both be happier if we postpone the groping to after we're upstairs.

“So, ready to do the next stage of the planning, before we can finally get to the fun part?”

Bella nods, but then she's suddenly scarlet in the face. I grin at her blush and gently trail my thumb over her hot cheek.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong,” she tries to evade me, but it only takes a stern look and she falters. “Not wrong,

exactly. I just don't want your tongue in my butt today!”

Her voice is all high pitched and frantic, and I just can't stop myself, I have to laugh at her shriek. For a moment Bella's just staring at me, before the look of panic morphs into something close to a sneer.

“Why are you laughing like that? It's so not funny! I also don't understand why your one goal in life seems to be to constantly embarrass me!”

“Okay, okay, calm down, I'm not laughing *at* you,” I try to pacify her, but of course she doesn't buy it.

“Sure you are!”

I sigh and try to show some unique chagrin so she'll calm down again.

“Okay, yes, I admit it, I just laughed at you, but just because you're so fucking adorable when you blush like that. It doesn't happen too often anymore, you know?” I lean closer and look deep into her eyes, while I cup her still flaming cheeks with my hands. “I adore your blush. And I love you.

Forgive me?”

She's already grinning when I add the last two sentences and I can literally see her fury melt. I'm still awed at how strong her feelings for me are that she's so quick to overlook it when I'm deliberately acting like an idiot.

“Just this once.”

I kiss her hungrily instead of answering, and she leans into me for a moment, but then she's dancing away from me, up the stairs.

“I'll take a quick shower, see you in the playroom!” I follow her slowly and change into my leather pants while she's in the shower. Normally I would join her, but I'm not sure I can keep my hands to myself for long. Ten minutes later she joins me in the playroom, dressed only in a fluffy bathrobe, her hair tied into a high ponytail.

“Okay, so how do we start?”

I grin at her eagerness and kiss her nose gently, before I start my usual pre-scene routine – which is dishearteningly boring, as Bella will soon find out. I show her the whole emergency kit – scissors for cutting ropes that need to come off, a knife for everything the scissors won't cut, the first aid kit, trauma blanket, fire extinguisher, the cooling pads I just got from the freezer. Her enthusiasm doesn't curb, but I can tell that she's never considered in detail what can go wrong.

After we're done with that, I fetch the things I intend to use today and meticulously check everything twice. There are no knots or weak parts in the hemp ropes, the lube bottle is half full, the latex of the butt plug is smooth and has no tears, and the padded bench is clean after the last time we've used it. I then show Bella the stocks and how they are fixed to the bench – and I can see her anxiety peek through the excitement for the first time.

“Any second thoughts?”

She shakes her head immediately, but she's also gnawing on her bottom lip.

“No, of course not, I trust you.”

“I didn't question your trust in me, but if you're too apprehensive, now's the time to speak up.”

Bella nods but remains silent. To myself I can admit that I'm relieved that she's still a little hesitant. I believe that she really trusts me, and I hope I've earned that by now, but it's good that she also thinks for herself what she does or doesn't want to get into.

“Great. Anything else you wanna know or add to our planning? Because if not, I'm done with all the preparations.”

A few moments pass before she shakes her head, and ditching her fluffy robe by the door, she kneels down on her cushion, assuming her waiting position. I remain standing by the bench for a while, and just take her in, feeling my own excitement slowly catch up with me.

Two days since our little romp on the table, and by now the marks I left have pretty much faded for good. Only a few mottled spots remain on her waist where I'd been gripping her pretty hard are still visible as such. I love being rough with her, and it's good that she doesn't bruise too easily.

All of a sudden I'm obsessed with the idea of leaving some mark or other on her that I can think of later tonight, when we're out meeting with the others. Nothing as severe as spanking her until she can't sit down, but I want her to carry something of me around that reminds us both of what we've been up to.

I wander over to her and lean down so that my lips are right next to her ear, watching with a smile how goose bumps break out all over her skin. My voice is low when I speak, and I try to sound as seductive as possible.

“Just how far are you willing to go today?”

Her breath hitches for a moment, before she relaxes again.

“As far as you want to take me, Master.”

“I want you to pick one of the impact toys that you like, and then tell me how many times you think you can stand being hit with it.” I can't really spank her as long as she's in the stocks as I need her to keep relatively still, so I want to use something that doesn't make her react too much. A crop would be ideal, but I want her to choose, as that always leaves a more lasting mental impression.

Bella hesitates, and I wonder what she's considering. Almost anything she picks can be used to either tease or really torment her. When she finally answers, her voice is husky but strong.

“The soft leather flogger, with the blue and black handle, please? And I'm sure I can take thirty hard

hits, Sir.”

I don't even try to hide a grin as I place a gentle kiss onto her neck before I get up. A really good choice, and one that fits perfectly into my plan. We got the flogger together, and Bella has grown rather fond of it. I know how much she loves to feel the light sting on her ass, or just the sensation of the soft strands running over her body. I wonder how much she will hate me when I turn one of her favorite toys against her, but she'll likely forgive me at some point between the second and third time I make her come.

I take the flogger from its place on the wall and lay it down next to my other things, before I turn back to Bella. She hasn't moved, but when I snap my fingers and point at the bench she's quick to get up and onto the padded table. From up close it's evident that she's shaking slightly, and I run my hands over her naked back a few times to soothe her. A calm look appears on her face as she savors my touch and relaxes for a moment.

Of course I have to take the opening for what it is, and Bella gasps loudly when my hand comes down hard on her ass.

“Time to lock you up. Place your wrists and neck in the stocks.” She hesitates, and this time I don't let that go unpunished. I slap her ass again with more force, and Bella lurches forward, grasping onto the wooden frame with her hands. Four more spanks before I stop to admire the deep red patches that are now on her otherwise light skin, then I stalk over to her head.

Bella immediately averts her gaze when she sees me glare at her, and before I can admonish her, she leans forward and assumes the ordered position. She's trembling slightly, but as her breathing calms down so does the shaking.

“Don't make me punish you again,” I tell her in a stern voice, and I see the muscles in her throat move as she swallows. It hasn't happened often, but there have been a few incidents when she called down a little more on herself than she bargained for. I don't really mind disciplining her, and I kind of like her playful, somewhat bratty character, but there's a time and place for that, and today is definitely neither. I know some Doms would cane that behavior right out of her, but that's not my style. Though even I have my limits of what I will tolerate, and today she's pushing back in the wrong places. We're doing something new, so I need to be careful with her, and can't risk that things take on a dynamic of their own.

Bella tenses up all over as I shut the stocks and secure the top part of the frame with a small latch. I could lock it, but I deliberately don't. The way the stocks are constructed the latch will disengage if she moves enough, to ensure that, contrary to what I told her, she can easily get out of them if she has to. As with so many other things, locking her up like this is a mind thing, and the fact that she trusts me enough to let me do this to her is more of a turn on than actually securing her for real would be.

While she's still calming down I fetch the rope, and after prying her knees apart I tie her legs to the bench. That forces her into a halfway uncomfortable position, which, of course, is intentional. She's kneeling on the low, padded table now with her knees farther apart than her hips, and the height of the stocks is forcing her to push her ass high in the air, completely open and vulnerable. There's a definite

strain on her spine as she has to keep her back straight to avoid putting too much pressure onto her wrists and neck inside the padded wooden frame, but the whole setup isn't designed for her comfort. Not even for mine, I dryly admit to myself, as I will have to bend my knees so I can fuck her mouth, and I might have to actually get onto the bench if I want to stick my dick into another part of her, but that's equally not the point. If we wanted comfort, we'd be lying side by side in our bed, after all.

I check the rise and fall of her chest again, and decide that I've given her enough time to calm down and get accustomed to the awkward position I'm forcing her to assume. Her eyes are closed and she seems to be murmuring something under her breath, probably telling herself to stay composed.

I slowly make my way around her once to check again that she can't jerk in the restraints and injure herself, before I stop and crouch down next to her face so that we're on eye level. She hesitantly glances at me, but keeps her eyes down even when I address her.

"I've changed my mind about what I want to do with you now that I have you all helpless before me." Fuck with her mind before you do the same with her body. "I'm only going to fuck two of your holes, your mouth being one. I'll be considerate and even let you chose the other. So what's it gonna be?"

Bella swallows again, but doesn't hesitate with her answer.

"Please fuck my ass, Sir."

"Good girl."

I gently stroke her cheek, but when I see her smile I grab her hair and yank her head to the side so that she's staring right at me.

"You're going to be my good, obedient slut today, right? Or will I have to make you obey me again?"

She hurries to nod her head, as much as her position and I will let her.

"I'll be your good, obedient slut, Sir!"

I let go of her with a smirk before I straighten and walk over to the side table to get the lube and butt plug. When I return to her, Bella is wriggling her behind at me in anticipation, and I slap her playfully before I run my fingers up and down the crack of her ass. Her pussy is already dripping wet, but I ignore it deliberately. The only thing that's going there today is the flogger if I have my say.

A soft sigh escapes her when I squirt the cool lube right into her anus, then scoop up some of the excess and gently push my finger into her. For a moment I feel her clamp down and tense up so I stop until she relaxes again, wriggling my finger around before I push in further. I add a second finger and fuck her gently for a minute, just long enough to have her fully enjoy it, but not get too aroused.

Bella gasps when I stop toying with her, and push the lubed up plug straight into her ass. I'm sure I haven't really hurt her, but she's clearly not entirely comfortable, the way her thighs flex. I quickly wipe my fingers clean and pick up the flogger, intent on not giving her any chance to relax any further.

I trail the soft nappa leather strands from her ass up her back, making her shudder slightly, before I step away and aim a quick swing at her left thigh.

A visible shudder runs through her delectable body, and I can tell that Bella is fighting to keep still. I know how restricted and helpless she must be feeling now – for some reason, being restrained by something rigid and unyielding like the stocks has a stronger impact on the mind than ropes, although I've had her in tighter bondage before.

I keep my attention on her thighs, aiming to redden them slowly with sure strokes that shouldn't hurt her at all. She keeps tensing up after every other hit, but she doesn't shy away. I soon move my target to her luscious ass cheeks, hitting them with a little more force but still keeping to a slow, steady rhythm. She rewards me with a few low moans, and when I stop, I see that her labia are all puffy and wet – my girl is clearly enjoying herself there.

Not that I mind, but I guess it's time to step up the pace.

Bella shudders when the next time I hit her, the flogger connects with her upper back just left of her spine. I keep the strokes light, judging her reaction before I speed up, and finish the sequence with a few harder ones on her ass.

The sound of her labored breathing is music to my ears, and I let my fingers trail over her new heated skin, touching and soothing her. Bella relaxes gradually, but I have to spank her hard again when she pushes her ass into my hand, clearly wanting some friction in the right places.

“My, my, someone's needy today,” I remark dryly, and step away from her after a last slap.

It's hard to keep myself from going on, but I leave Bella as she is for a few endless minutes. At first she seems to appreciate the chance to calm down again, but then she starts to fidget, and that's not a very comfortable thing to do when you can hardly move. I console myself with staring at her ass and spread legs – all for me, *mine* to do with as I please. I just love seeing her like that, all her smooth skin bared, her thighs and ass already showing a few light lines where the flogger strands hit harder. My cock is responding to the wonderful display before me, and I have to concentrate hard to will the worst of my boner away.

Bella is clearly getting antsy, and I watch her fingers flex a few times. I know it's cruel to leave her like that, but I want her on edge, both dreading and yearning my touch.

Normally I would masturbate her now, get her off before I go on, but I seldom get a chance to draw her torment out like that.

Another minute passes, and Bella starts trying to stretch her back and find a more comfortable position, but between the stocks and the ropes, she's unable to find any relief for her stressed muscles. I decide that it's time to distract her a little more, and raise the flogger as I step up to her again. She immediately stops fidgeting, only her thighs flexing as she tries to steel herself.

This time I start at her ass with faster, more forceful strokes, before I turn my attention higher up. I

know that she likes to have her butt flogged, but I seldom get a chance to have a go at her back as I have the annoying habit of tying her arms together there. It's not as much fun as having a go at her ass or legs as I have to pay close attention not to hit her spine or shoulder blades square on, but the way she keeps shivering and stretching is most appealing.

Soon she keeps pushing her shoulders together, a sure sign that she would evade me if she could, and I direct the strokes to her legs instead. For a few seconds she seems relieved, even lets her head hang a little, making me smile. Because she's doing that she doesn't see my grin turn into a smirk as I redirect my aim again.

A loud hiss leaves her when the flogger strands hit her wet, swollen pussy, then again and again. I love whipping her sex, as she usually responds with the most adorable ass wiggling, and today isn't any different. Only now she's more wound up, and by now hopefully frustrated, and her moaning has a definite edge to it. Of course that doesn't deter me, and I keep on until her gasps are laced with pain.

When I put the flogger down for now her pussy has taken on a nice red tinge, and when I lean closer and blow over her tormented flesh, Bella moans wantonly. I know she expects me to touch her there now, but instead I straighten and walk over to her head.

She's huffing a little when I tilt her face up with a hand on her chin, and I'm tempted to go right back to whipping her cunt. But when her eyes focus on me she's all meek, and I take pity on her. Somewhat.

Bella licks her lips when I push my pants down and get my cock out. Of course I'm hard as always when she's all helpless before me and I've just flogged her until she's close to protesting.

“Do you want to suck my cock, slut?”

She eagerly nods and I smirk down at her.

“Then come and get it.”

Chapter 7

A slight frown appears on her forehead, but instead of protesting she's quickly craning her neck, trying to reach my cock. It's quite amusing to see her fight against her restraints, but when she finally laps at the head of my cock with her pink tongue, I can't quite stifle a groan. That in turn makes her grin, earning herself a glare and my cock shoved deep into her mouth.

Bella recovers quickly and once she has figured out how she has to turn her head so that she can not only suck on my cock but also move up and down on it, she's doing a good job pleasing me. I watch her, the sight doing just as much for me as the heavenly sensation of her hot mouth on me. I consider holding back, but I know that I will be all wound up myself if I keep flogging her without my release soon.

I can tell that she's growing tired fast, the added strain of not being able to move freely demanding its toll, so before long I step away, and tell her to jerk me off with her hand instead. In the playroom I seldom order her to do that, and she seems a little put off at first, which will earn her some more spanks later, but then she goes to work. I close my eyes and hum contently while her hand pumps me as fast as she can with her limited range of movement, and before long I feel my orgasm nearing.

Just before I'm about to come I step away, forcing her to let go, and instead palm my dick myself. A few quick strokes up and down and my climax washes through me, and most of my spunk hits her right in her face. She's quick to close her eyes, but still squawks somewhat indignantly. I can't help but chuckle when she grimaces at the jizz dripping from her nose and chin, but of course right now it's a bad idea for her to be grossed out by a facial.

Grinning dirtily down at her I scoop some of the spunk up and push my fingers into her mouth.

“Suck.”

She obeys without hesitation, and I repeat the same procedure until her face is more or less clean, but I'm sure that she can still smell my semen all over herself. When I step closer to her she quickly laps at my cock, cleaning me without having to be told, but she doesn't look too happy when she's done.

After zipping myself back up I crouch down before her so that our faces are at the same height, and look deep into her eyes. She's flushed from the exertion, and she's trembling slightly, a sure sign that I should move on before she's getting too distracted to come in the end. It's a rocky slope between going too easy on and overwhelming her, and while I might still choose to keep her from having a climax in the end, I don't want to finish the scene on a bad note because I misjudged her stamina.

“How ya holding up?” I whisper, only loud enough that she can barely hear me.

A slight smile appears on her face, and her next exhale is a little stressed.

“I'm okay. But my lower back's hurting”

I nod and place a gentle kiss onto her sweaty forehead before I get up and reach into my pocket. Bella frowns at the unsuspected move, but then I never planned to tell her *everything* I'm going to do to her.

My smirk is back when I show her the clamps, connected with a thin chain.

Her expression turns pleading, but she's wise enough to keep her mouth shut. Her breath picks up and she hisses when I attach the clamps to her hard nipples, making sure that they are tight and won't slip off easily, even when I yank on the chain. Bella whines softly, and I decide that there's a better way to punish her misgivings about the facial than to spank her.

A little rummaging in my supplies cabinet brings up the box with the small weights, and I select two of the bullet shaped ones. Bella doesn't see what I'm doing, of course, and I make sure that she's still oblivious of what's to come until I'm back at her side, and attach the weights to the clamps.

The most satisfying “ungh!” leaves her lips as I let go, and the weights make the clamps bite even more into her nipples. She immediately tries to alleviate the additional stress and pain by pushing her chest towards the bench, but the height of the stocks makes it impossible for her to bend her back enough to reach the padded table. The motion only lets the weights swing more, tugging harder on her nipples until she stills again.

Gloating at her would be childish now, and I keep myself from doing it, instead I pick up the flogger. Bella is now all tensed up as she's trying to either fight or get accustomed to the pain, but I don't care, and return to painting red streaks all over her ass. A few times I hit the plug and she moans, but it's evident that she's not quite content with what I'm doing to her.

When I decide that her ass has seen enough of the flogger, I step up close to the bench and lean over her, kissing her back softly while I run my hands up and down her thighs. Bella groans softly, but she's slow to relax now, and I have to keep on for a while before she lets her guard down.

I keep my lips at her back but run my palms up over her sides until I reach her breasts. She immediately tenses up again, making me chuckle with glee as I cup her tits, pressing the weights into her full breasts for a moment, before I let go, and she groans with the intensified pain.

“Like that?”

She's silent as she's doubtlessly fighting the urge to lie to appease me, but her recurring hesitation is a kind of answer, too. Again I reach for her tits, only now I grab the clamps and press them together for a moment, forcing the teeth deeper into her already tortured flesh.

“Stop, please!” Bella cries out, but I keep the pressure up for another five seconds before I let go. She's blinking furiously, her hands balled into fists as she's trying to keep the tears from spilling, but a single drop escapes her left eye and leaves a wet streak down her cheek. I hold her gaze over the mirror for a moment, then bend my head and kiss her shoulder gently once more.

“I don't like you being so hesitant today. When I ask you something, you answer, understand?”

I kiss her again, but this time with a scrape of teeth to show her my displeasure. She's nodding even

before I look up for confirmation.

“Yes, Master!”

“Why do you hesitate then? Do you want me angry with you?” She's shaking her head forcefully enough to make the nipple weights swing again, but she doesn't even wince.

“Of course not, Master. I won't do it again!”

“I hope so, for your own sake.”

Another kiss, and I step away from her.

“The weights stay on while I fuck your ass now. As do the stocks. You don't deserve anything more comfortable than that.”

I'm surprised when she doesn't speak up, but bows her head meekly.

Technically I'm violating the boundaries we set when we were talking the scene through, but she clearly wants to please me now, and is ready to suck it up. It's also a vote of trust in me, which I appreciate a lot.

She sighs when I pull the plug from her ass and drop it on the floor before I reach for the lube again. I apply the clear substance liberally onto my fingers before I shove them into her, fucking her a little roughly to get the lube deep enough into her. Bella groans, but the note of pain disappears quickly, and I know I'm doing a good job shifting the balance from discomfort to pleasure again.

Then I peel the leather pants from my legs and put one foot onto the bench outside of her leg before I position my cock and push it gently against her sphincter. As predicted the position is a little awkward, but a bit of wriggling around and I find a good angle that lets me push my cock slowly into her.

Bella moans loudly as I stretch her until she's taking all of me, and I playfully slap her ass for that. She tenses up which makes her clench around me deliciously, and I grin down at her back. My beautiful girl, all horny and ready to be fucked, even when she's forced to keep in position, and unable to even scratch her nose.

I grip her hips and slowly ease out of her until only the head of my cock is inside, before I push back in, not much faster. She groans again, the sound urging me on, but I keep a tight hold on her while I move as slowly as I can.

I'm sure she's expecting me to go all wild on her ass any second now, but I'm rather enjoying the slow pace, and this way I can ensure that I don't slam her shoulders into the hard wood of the stocks.

I'm not yet fully hard because I just came all over her face, but feeling her all around me does the trick equally well as spanking her would have, and the way her tits bounce helps, too, as I watch myself fucking her in the mirror.

Before long I feel my need to come grow stronger, though taking her like this is nice, and I'm sure I could keep it up for a longer while. Still, I'm a little concerned with the strain I'm putting on her. After all, I want her to enjoy herself, even when I force things like the nipple clamps on her that she wouldn't have asked for. So I decide to change my own rules – after all, it's my call to do with her as I please.

Bella groans when I pull out of her completely, but I ignore her protest and reach for the ropes to untie her legs. Even after the restraints are gone she remains in the same position, and I see her tremble more strongly than before.

A hurt filled gasp, which has nothing to do with the kind of pain I want her to feel, escapes her when I grab her hips and force her legs together. The grimace is gone from her face after the moment her back needs to straighten, and she remains kneeling like that on the bench without moving further. Her ass is even higher in the air than before, and there's no way I can comfortably fuck her now, so I decide I might as well abandon my plan completely.

She's clearly surprised when I disengage the latch on the side of the stocks and push on her shoulder until she straightens up. The movement makes the weights swing merrily at the end of the nipple clamps, and I'm dying to bite into her delicious tits. I refrain from doing so, but instead tell her to lie down on her back instead. She quickly complies, and I give her a moment to stretch her body into a comfortable position.

Bella hasn't quite recovered yet when I grab her hips and pull her down until her ass is hanging over the edge of the table. I push her legs together and pull them up onto my left shoulder, before I take hold of my cock and push back into her well lubed ass. The look on Bella's face is priceless as she stares up at me, her eyes wide and her lips parted slightly. I grin down at her as I tighten my grip on her legs, withdrawing slowly – before I thrust right back into her, as deep as I can, making her arch her back and cry out in need.

I know she's worn out from the way I've kept her restrained, but that doesn't hinder me from fucking her hard and fast. She frantically grabs the sides of the bench to keep her body from sliding around with the force of my thrusts, which causes her tits to bounce even more than before. I know that each time I slam into her, the clamps tug painfully on her nipples, and I love knowing that I'm affecting her whole body like that.

And it's not as if she would just lie there and let me have my way with her, suffering through it. Her teeth are clamped around her bottom lip but that doesn't keep the string of moans and whimpers to escape her, and I feel her hips move against mine with every thrust. Her fingers dig into the padding of the bench, and long before I'm close to coming, I feel the telltale shudders of her impending orgasm wrack through her body.

“Please -” she's panting, but her plea cuts off suddenly and turns into a scream as I catch the chain between her nipples and tug roughly on it. Her back comes off the bench for a moment, just as I was hoping, and I let go of her legs completely so I can grasp both clamps and pull them off her nipples. Bella screams again, louder this time, and her hands come off the sides of the bench to cover her aching nubs.

I let her, a new idea forming in my mind. She's still panting loudly as my fingers find her clit, and stroke it meticulously as I pick up fucking her ass even harder.

“Do you want to come?” I ask her, a truly stupid question that's kind of rhetorical, but I just love hearing her beg.

“Fuck, yes, please!” she shouts, her need ringing clear in every word.

“I will let you come as often as you want, but only if you pinch your nipples while I keep fucking you.”

Her eyes widen and she's pleading with her gaze for me to change my mind, but I'll have nothing of that. I increase my pace and rub her clit harder, already feeling her tighten even more around me.

“And don't you dare come without permission, or I'll have you locked right into the stocks again!”

That of course holds her attention, and her hands come off her tits, before she takes her puffy nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

“Yeah, like that, and now squeeze and roll them until I tell you to stop.” She complies, her fingers closing around her nipples and tormenting them as sweet groans leave her parted lips. I tighten my one-handed grip on her legs and thrust even harder into her, until I feel her go over the edge.

Bella's back comes off the bench and she screams a last time, now a sound of purest pleasure.

A few thrusts later my own orgasm hits me, and I sink my teeth into the fleshy part of her calf as I come, leaving my mark on her body after all.

Bella's answering groan mingles with our heavy breathing, and I kiss her skin before I let go of her legs so I can sag half onto her body, my face wonderfully cushioned on her tits.

“Fuck!” comes her barely audible groan, making me chuckle as I turn my head and gaze up her body at her face. She eyes me with slight apprehension on her face, making me smirk at her, just for the sake of teasing her.

“We're done, right?” she asks, her voice anxious. “Because seriously, if we're not, I'm so going to slam a big fat 'yellow' right in your face for anything more involved than lying here and doing nothing!” I'm tempted to fuck round with her a little longer, but I know that I pretty much leached the life from her, so I shake my head after a few moments.

“Don't worry, we're done.”

She sags back onto the bench, her eyes closed, an elated smile on her face. Still grinning I press my face back against her boob, then flick my tongue over her tortured nipple. Bella whimpers, the sounds getting louder when I take it into my mouth and suck gently on it.

“Shit, that feels so amazing!”

I grin at her exclamation and keep on for a while, before I turn my head and repeat the same with her other nipple. I love doing that after I've had my cruel fun with her tits, proving with more than words how important she is to me.

Bella's fingers thread into my hair and she strokes my neck softly, and when I peek at her again, I'm met with a blissed out look on her relaxed features. I take my time worshiping her breasts, until I feel her nudge my shoulder gently.

“Off, I still need to wash my hair, and you know the snide comments that Alice will fire at me when I try to pass off wearing only mascara as full make-up.”

I don't move a muscle, but her pushing grows more insistent.

“Edward, move it!”

“I don't wanna,” I murmur into her breasts, making her laugh.

“But we have to, and you know why.”

I really don't, but the fact that it's important for her is enough for me. So I take a last lick at her nipple before I push myself up and help her off the bench. Bella is still somewhat unsteady on her legs, but by the time I've picked everything up to carry into the bathroom for cleaning, she is nearly her usual, sure self again.

“Seriously, biting my leg? Did you have to do that today? I wanted to wear that cute dress that I got a few weeks ago. But I can't very well show up parading this around.”

I glance at where she's pointing, and I have to admit, I'm weirdly happy about the neat set of tooth marks I left at her calf.

“You can't wear that dress anyway.”

“I could have, before you went all hungry caveman on me! Isn't it enough that you fucked my ass hard enough that I'm likely be sore for days to come?”

Actually no, but I'm wise enough to hold my tongue, and kiss her instead.

She's still reeking of my come, and if I may say so, we're both rather gross right now, covered in sweat, lube, and our juices in way more places than I remember having touched her.

“You didn't protest while I was doing said fucking, Love.” Bella rolls her eyes at me before she pads off towards the bathroom, her butt swaying deliciously in front of me.

“Whatever. Why can't I wear that dress?”

Because I don't want you parading around in front of *him* wearing an amount of fabric that can't seriously be considered a dress, but of course I don't say that out loud.

“Because you have light marks on your upper back, and I remember that the dress left you uncovered nearly down to your ass, right?” Where the marks are even worse, but I'm sure that I don't have to worry about anyone but me seeing them—ever.

Bella stops and glances back at me, before she turns around and tries to get a better look at her body in the mirrored walls.

“Seriously? That didn't even really hurt. I mean, compared to what you did to my hoo ha, or my butt.”

No, she didn't – again – I groan inwardly. This is slowly outgrowing the term running gag, and bordering on torture.

“Your what?”

Bella grins back at me over her shoulder.

“My hoo ha.”

“I'm sure that's not a real word.”

“It is, I looked it up, it's in the urban dictionary, so it's technically a word.” And that's the answer from someone who's an English Lit major.

“With what, two entries? Compared to the ten pages of unnecessary explanations for 'cunt' and 'pussy'?”

“I don't care,” she shoots back as she steps into the bathroom. “It's there, so it's a word that's in use. Accept it, I'm right.” I roll my eyes at her but leave it at my mute disapproval for an answer. It's her way of getting back at me for every time I call her my slut or cunt or whatever in the playroom.

While she steps into the shower I clean the butt plug with antibacterial soap, then soak the ropes in a fresh batch of warm, soapy water before I rinse and hang them up to dry. Bella is still busy washing her hair, and it would be a waste to pass up the last opportunity for the evening to grope her.

“Mind if I join you and your hoo ha in there?”

She grins at me as I step into the spray and shakes her head.

“Nope, you and your beaver cleaver are very welcome!” I don't even ask, but instead catch Bella around the waist and pull her close to me, hungrily kissing her mouth. She's laughing by the time I finally let go of her to reach for the body wash, but even though she's already done, she stays with me in the shower.

“You going to be okay tonight?”

“Why shouldn't I be?” I try to shrug her question off, but the way she's looking at me I'm not sure my attempt at nonchalance is working.

“Just asking. We generally don't talk about what happened, but I can't be the only one who's uneasy whenever we meet Alice and Jazz.” I wonder for a moment if her question is really a trap, but then quickly quell the feeling of paranoia trying to rise in me. She's just concerned, and considering the last five times we were out as a group, she's probably got enough cause to wonder what degree of awkwardness there will be this time.

“Nah, I'm good.”

Which is a blatant lie, but what else should I tell her? That I'd rather spend the evening with her, cuddling on the couch? That I even considered looking for a residency position in a hospital thousands of miles away from here, so I could hopefully drag her along? That if I could, I'd try to forbid her from seeing *him* again? Most of that I could never ask of her, and the rest just makes me seem more of a coward than I am. So lying to her is really the only thing I can do.

As usual I have no idea if she buys it or not, but after a moment she nods and leaves the shower to start the whole primping ritual. I keep staring at her silhouette on the other side of the foggy shower stall walls, not for the first time wondering just how many barriers there are left between us, where there shouldn't be any at all.

But some things I just can't tell her. Because some things I can't even tell myself.

Chapter 8

I want to be anywhere but here. Really anywhere. Even at the hospital for one of those endless 40 hours shifts. Just not here.

Bella's loud groan yanks me out of my glum thoughts. She just put her legs up onto the seat in front of her and is kneading her aching thighs. I probably should have made sure I didn't wear her out that much in the first place, but I think the time spent cuddling in bed afterwards was worth it.

And it's not like she complained about my efforts to gently knead the kinks out of her legs and back again, either.

“You know, we can always catch the next bus home and spend the evening on the couch, watching TV or something,” I offer, but even though I try to sound supportive, the words come out more like a whine.

Bella shoots me a dark look before she stretches languidly.

“We've talked about this before. Like a hundred times. You didn't have to come with me, but I sure as hell won't stay away from my friends just because you want to mope.”

I guess I deserve her scorn, and also her snide tone. I can't even hold it against her, the topic has been coming up nearly every time we talk. That doesn't keep me from being a little resentful, though. It's not often that I have a full day and a half of free time close to or on a weekend, and right now I just want to snuggle with Bella and forget about the rest.

The cynic in me is having a field day, a chance of drama ahead, me pussy whipped as never before, the perfect recipe for disaster. The realist in me knows that it's something else – something that's probably even independent of my aversion to meeting the people I used to call my closest friends.

It's a weird mental state, really. Common literature calls it 'top drop', as opposed to 'sub drop' when it happens to the passive partner. Bella's had a few over the last months, and scared the living shit out of me when it happened the first time, at the end of our second session no less. You get all clingy and weird and need comfort within an inch of your life – which isn't that hard to imagine for a sub after a pretty intense scene that threw her right over the edge of her comfort zone. But it happens to Doms, too, and I feel like I'm hurtling right into a black hole that tries to leach all the energy from me.

I don't even need to think hard to come up with an explanation. As much as I love setting a faster pace, pushing her until I'm edging along her limits, when it comes down to the gritty details, I'm hurting the woman that I love.

She likes it, we both get off on it, we could both have ended it any moment if we hadn't thoroughly enjoyed ourselves – but sometimes intense scenes where I'm going all out being a bastard, I'm feeling drained afterwards and in dire need of comfort and appreciation.

When we cuddle after a scene, it's as much for my benefit as Bella's. We both need grounding, we both need to find our way back to the persons that we are, leave behind the one-sided, black and white world of the playroom where rules are simple and satisfaction is guaranteed. I need to know and feel that she loves me, doesn't see me as the monster I could be if the context were any different. I need to know that she needs me to be exactly as I am. I need her.

I hate being so vulnerable. Being like that always reminds me of my time with Tanya, and that's not a state of mind that I want to revisit ever again. I know it's an irrational resentment as even if our roles were reversed, Bella wouldn't get off on leaving me raw and bleeding, emotionally. Still, for her I want to be strong and independent, I want to be the rock she can cling to and the light that illumines her life – and what I actually am is a mopey wuss.

In a way Bella seems to feel that I'm extra needy tonight as she keeps leaning into me even when she sneers at me, her finger drawing idle patterns on my thigh while she snuggles close, my arm across her shoulder. I still don't want to go to that club, but I know it means a lot to Bella, so of course I'm tagging along.

I murmur a belated “Sorry,” into her hair that she accepts with a gracious nod, before she turns her head and plants a soft kiss onto my jaw. I hug her even closer, and we spend the rest of the ride in silence.

Too soon we're at our stop, and minutes later inside the dark, loud, heated atmosphere of the club. The girl at the coat check smiles flirtatiously at me but I ignore her and make sure to keep my arm around Bella's waist in hope of avoiding anyone else looking at me. I've never been comfortable with random women throwing themselves at me, and with Bella so close it's even weirding me out. Can't they see that I'm clearly not interested?

Thankfully my girl is as oblivious to the flirty looks I'm getting as she is resistant to any advances from the male crowd. Sometimes I wonder if she's only playing innocent, but I've come to read her quite well over the years, and I think she really has no clue that she's always been a true head turner. Tonight is no exception, and I do my share of glaring and scowling as I follow her through the people milling around, absolutely not minding that she's leading the way as I get a good eye full of her pert ass.

With the dress out of commission, she has chosen to wear dark pants and a thin, white and blue striped halter neck top. I have to grin every time my gaze roams down her bare arm to her right wrist where a wide silver bangle is hiding her leather band and the rather ominous grazes she obtained somewhere along our session this afternoon. She was as stunned as I when she found them while we were cooking together, and I got a swat with the dish towel for that. Not that she's angry, it's more like an inside joke between us. We both end up with weird bruises sometimes with no idea how or even when we got them, but this time I'm clearly to blame. It's nothing serious so I don't have a guilty conscience, but it's things like that that define our lives nowadays. Check every bared inch of skin for marks before you leave the house unless you want to answer awkward questions.

I'm even more underdressed than Bella in a faded pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, with sneakers completing the outfit. The muscles in my thighs are still complaining from what we got up to before,

and my left hip is acting up a little. I also feel like my left arm might be sore tomorrow, the flogger be damned. I usually complain that my weird working schedule keeps us from playing more often, but I think that would likely end with one or both of us in dire need of physical therapy before long. And I'm only twenty-four, I have no idea how I'll survive doing this when I'm forty. Maybe I should have gone for orthopedic surgery instead of trauma after all.

I feel my mood lifting slightly as the vibe of the club draws me in. The beat of the music is calling to me, slowly chasing away the bad thoughts with the allure of rhythm and dancing. Even though she has a history of clumsy accidents, Bella loves to dance, and who am I to deny her the chance to wriggle her ass against my crotch for extended amounts of time? We even went to a salsa dancing course this summer, a rather funny and very rewarding experience, although our instructors were less than amused by our constant quiet laughter and sometimes unnecessary groping. But it's not exactly my fault Bella dissolves into a fit of giggles every time anyone mentions the man leading his woman, and I consider myself blessed to be with someone who can be as immature as that sometimes.

Sadly I don't get a chance to drag her onto the dance floor before we have to face reality and meet the others as Bella is like a blood hound when it comes to hunting down Jazz. Not that it takes much to single him out in a crowd – tall, blond, trim built, an obnoxiously chipper pixie constantly attached to his arm, even a blind man could track those two down in minutes. Apprehension immediately wells up in me, but I force myself to stay calm and keep any glares to where Bella can't see them. She does not approve, and who am I to defy the woman I love?

I guess our greeting would seem normal to an unknowing bystander, as Alice basically jumps first Bella, then me with her emphatic embrace and air kisses, and Bella and Jasper's hug is as warm as it always was. Personal record for me, five seconds into being close around him, and I already want to punch him in the face for touching her. I know I'm overreacting, but that doesn't help keep my bile from rising. Jazz and I barely nod at each other, without making eye contact. There's only one other guy I greet with less enthusiasm, and it's heartwarming how the man who was my best buddy now ranges at the same level as the idiot who tried to end my career before it even really started.

Alice and Jazz already got a pitcher of beer, so at least I don't have to flag down a waitress to get some booze. Alice is all excited about Bella's birthday so we do the stupid “cheers!” thing even though it's still a week until the actual date, and I can finally take a deep draft to wet my parched throat. The usual chit chat between the girls ensues, and I just sit back and listen, idly drumming along to the beat of the song with my fingers on Bella's thigh.

“I'm so sorry I can't make it to your party next week, but you know how important the NY fashion week is, I just have to be there to promote my new line, everything else would be bordering on suicide!” Alice chirps, doing some crazy eye rolling and gesticulating with her hands. As usual, she's all dressed up in some flimsy layered pink top and tight leather capri pants, some rose ornament head band keeping her spiky hair in check. Not for the first time I wonder how I could ever let her drag me so far into her world that I actually know that those shorts are referred to as capri pants.

Or something like that. Alice must be out of her mind because of fashion week approaching as for once Jazz looks as if he was allowed to pick his own clothes for the evening – beige cargo pants and a blue shirt with some weird design on it – which is saying a lot.

If I could for one moment forget just why and how things went down, I could even say that Jazz and I are not that different from each other. Both fools, both madly in love with a woman we know we don't deserve, and for whom we're more than ready to sacrifice everything. I mean that's exactly what he did – he cut himself out of my and Bella's life, burned all the bridges, and of course, got the girl, because we're living in a world where the end justifies all means. Only that he's a deceiving little shit who everyone just welcomes back with open arms after he hangs his head and shuffles his feet for five minutes, while I take all the blame and still can't look into my own eyes in the mirror.

I try to push those thoughts and memories away before I do something that will end with one phone call for me, and instead study the menu that's printed on the paper place mats on the table. Most of the club is taken up by the dance floor, but Alice hasn't shut up over the delicious snacks they have, so I might as well find out for myself if she was right, even more so if it keeps me from getting gratuitously violent. Bella meanwhile does some uncomfortable blushing and simpering because of some promise of a present from Alice, but I don't really pay much attention, except for the

“you'll get it next week from Jazz” part that, of course, only fuels the 'Hulk smash!' reaction inside of me.

“So who's coming to the party next week? You said your dad and Sue would come up from Forks? I wonder how they'll do with Renee and Phil.” Bella shrugs, rather unimpressed.

“I'm not really worried, I mean Mom and Dad always got along well after the divorce, and I think since Charlie finally found a woman to cook for and love him as he is, mom's a lot more relaxed. I just don't know if Phil can make it, he has a game on Friday and there was something about the plane schedule. Edward, did Renee say anything last time you talked to her?” Ah right, Renee and I skype. Because someone apparently explained to her how the program works, and Bella was too lazy to sign in with her own account one weekend, and ever since her mother has mine in her contact list. As it seems we're the only ones on said list, and whenever I'm stupid enough to go online, Renee literally jumps me and tells me every insignificant detail of her life she can think of until I come up with some moderately believable excuse as to why I have to head out. I have no idea what it is with me and women that they think they have to abuse me as their stand in best girlfriend – Alice does it, Bella used to do it before she became the real deal, and now her mom is next in line. At least she tells me every week that I have her full approval and that I'm the perfect son-in-law that she's always wished for. I still haven't figured out if that's a good thing, or the worst insult to my masculinity ever.

“She just said that she doesn't know if Phil can make it, but she'll come anyway, because her little girl doesn't turn a quarter of a century every day.”

Bella makes a face at that.

“I swear to you, if you gloat over my age again, I'll find a way to make you really sorry!”

Grinning broadly, I place a gentle kiss on her nose before I shuffle discreetly out of her reach.

“I don't know what it is with you and your age. It's totally hot to date an older woman.”

I'm laughing so hard that I nearly fall from my chair when Bella launches herself at me, and the sudden added weight makes pain radiate from my hip. Ah, the joys of age and of being a randy bastard. It would be easy to subdue the snarling yet tired bundle of energy on my lap, but I let her punch me playfully a few times before I shut her up with a deep kiss. She melts against me, but only for a second, then she's biting my bottom lip and retreating to her own seat, my insatiable vixen. I consider picking her up and molesting her in one of the dark corners of the huge room right this minute, but Alice's glare is enough to tame my raging libido to a simmering need.

Ever since *the incident*, as Alice refers to it, whatever I do is frowned upon when it comes with even the slightest hint of innuendo. A chaste kiss or innocent touch is okay, but anything more involved than that, and Miss Brandon is frowning her disapproval for everyone to see. If Bella initiates it Alice at least hold her tongue, but woe is me if I show even a hint of dominant behavior, because the pixie will have a field day. While she seemed tolerant enough when I called her after the weekend I was sure had damaged our relationship beyond repair, she's been regressing ever since. She clearly doesn't mind Bella and me being together, and I'd even go so far and say she'd pester us about marriage if either of us showed even the slightest inclination that we were ready to tie that knot, but the fact that we have a sex life that's maybe a little more defined than is the norm seems to disagree with her. Why I have no idea, as I spent nearly an hour explaining myself hoarse that whatever might have happened that week, Bella is my everything and I have no intention of sharing her with anyone else, or go looking for something on the side myself, but she still seems paranoid. I think she even bought my white little lie, as theoretically our scene with Beth was a clear violation of that, but for me, things in the playroom just count as something else.

And the fact that whenever Jazz and I are in close proximity we both behave like two rabid dogs barely able to hide our hostility behind a pleasant mask should help tidy over her misgivings. After all, she was pretty fast to forgive him for wanting to whore around while making her believe that he'd stay exclusive with her. Why can't she show me the same courtesy when all I want to do is spend the rest of my life with Bella?

Meanwhile Bella has saved the day and is once again talking about the party planning, so I return to perusing the menu. We've cooked a quick dinner together and eaten right out of the pan, feeding each other and getting more onto the floor than into our mouths, but I so didn't mind having to lick sauce off her chin. And her cleavage. And in passing lapping and sucking her tormented nipples until she threw her head back and more or less pleaded for me to fuck her again right on the kitchen counter. By then it had been too late for that and we would have likely never made it out of the condo, much to my chagrin. Just thinking about her sensitive nipples makes me hard again, and I'm determined to make up for what I've been missing on account of our busy schedule – sooner rather than later.

“Found anything interesting on the menu that you've been staring at for the last ten minutes?”

I smile at Bella's whisper into my ear, and shrug mutely. Knowing me well enough after six years, Bella chuckles before biting her lip, intensifying the problem in my now too tight jeans.

“I think you said the quesadillas are so delicious, right?” It's oddly comforting that I'm not the only one who has been pestered with the food they serve here. The description of the different fillings sounds mouth-watering enough, and I'm only too happy to let Bella choose which ones we should try.

“Oh they are!” Alice confirms, doing that annoying clapping thing again.

“But I can't eat any, you know, I have to be looking my best next week, and I've been living off nothing but carrots for days already.” As if Alice has ever had a single extra gram of body mass. The only reason she hasn't become a model herself is her height, but she could sweep down any catwalk any day if she wanted without changing her eating habits. On cue Jasper's stomach rumbles loudly, and I wonder just how far that carrot diet has been extended in their household. The thought cracks me up, and my laughter is apparently contagious, as Bella joins right in.

“That's too bad, really,” Bella surmises, still grinning. “But the three of us could share a plate, I mean with all the fillings it's hard to settle on just one.”

And people say that foot-in-mouth disease is pathologically occurring in guys only.

If it weren't so sad, it would be funny to watch how Alice's mood changes.

It's as if someone pulled a switch from bubbly and exuberant to glaring harpy mode. Equally amusing is the way how Jazz visibly shuts down, only the look of panic in his eyes speaking of what's going on inside of him. My instinctual reaction is to crack some really bad joke that probably only twelve year olds would find funny, but until four months ago Jazz, Bella, and I weren't exactly known for the maturity of our humor. Somewhat wiser now I hold my tongue, but it's so damn hard because Bella is still oblivious of our reactions as she hasn't looked up from the menu yet.

Alice is ready to explode, but I know that nothing I can say now will change a thing – it's Bella's turn to diffuse the situation, and not even the seconds of loaded silence tip her off how her words might have been perceived. I'm even tempted to wait for things to get worse when she will inevitably vote for her favorite fillings – chicken breast and portobello mushrooms – but I'm afraid that I won't survive the laughing fit that I will have to succumb to in order not to burst. So I knock my knee discreetly into her thigh in the hope of making her focus on her surroundings.

“What is it?” Bella absentmindedly grunts, and for a moment Jazz's and my gaze lock. I see the same urge to laugh about the sheer hilarity of the situation in his eyes, and for a moment the connection we've always shared is there again. Years of teasing Bella for her crazy verbal diarrhea, particularly when she's drunk, have honed our skills to make already funny statements worse, and I even wonder where we find the restraint to hold back. But then reality makes that bubble burst, and I'm feeling positively morose all of a sudden.

Clearing my throat noisily finally does the trick and Bella looks up, only to find herself at the center of hostile attention. She's confused for a few moments, her gaze skimming from Jazz to me, until she finally realizes her mistake as she looks over at Alice. Her cheeks flame up immediately, and I can nearly hear the 'oh shit!' that must be zooming through her thoughts.

More awkward silence ensues, until Bella finally reclaims her voice.

“Or we'll just get a plate on our own. I'm too greedy to share anyway.” Not the best save, but it could have been worse. I hurry to flag down a waitress, and Alice slowly calms down while we place our

orders. Because now the three of us share the confidence of a tree mold Bella and I get some avocado and mango quesadillas, and Jazz gets his with ham and sour cream. Alice seems pacified enough and more than happy to fill the heavy silence with not exactly amusing tales of how her assistant nearly ruined her latest clothing line.

By the time the order arrives I'm in dire need of a divine intervention or some booze, preferably both, and Bella doesn't look too happy, either. The food at least is holding up to expectations, even though the company is somewhat lacking.

We're halfway through the quesadillas when Alice gets up, immediately grumpy when Bella doesn't instantly surge to her feet to follow.

“Alice, I really don't have to go to the bathroom ...”

“Come on, girl-talk time!”

Apparently all women belong to a secret society so evasion is impossible, and after a last, somewhat panicked look at me, Bella joins Alice, and they leave Jazz and me behind to guard the food, or whatever. In the reality according to Alice, we can't make stupid remarks, but for some reason it's still allowed for us guys to hang out, unwatched and unguarded, for five minutes. Or ten. Fuck, I hope it's only five.

If the plate sharing comment has been awkward, we need a new word for the atmosphere that is settling on the table now that the girls are gone. For endless minutes Jazz and I both avoid even acknowledging each other's presence, munching our food and finishing the rest of our beers. The food is tasteless and the beer almost sour, and the resentment and anger inside of me makes me physically ill. I wish I were a smoker so I could use that as an excuse to go outside until the girls return, but in the absence of that I can't think of any other reason for getting up that won't make me look like a wimp. So I sit there and stare either at the table or at the people around us, and try hard not to think of anything at all so my mind can't flip and send me into doing something I will later regret.

The waitress returns to take our empty plates and glasses away, and remains batting her lashes at us until we both tell her that we'll get our drinks later directly at the bar. For some reason that breaks our talking embargo, or maybe manners make us feel obliged to have some small talk.

“How's it going at the hospital?”

I shrug as there's really not much to say.

“Good, I guess. Working long hours as usual.”

Jazz nods, looking in my direction but not at me.

“How's work?” I remember some detail Bella dropped last week, and in my attempt to appear civil I add, “Did you already launch your company?” He seems surprised that I know that he and two of his co-workers decided to found their own business to get out of corporate hell, and for a moment our gazes cross.

“Not yet, some bureaucratic crap keeps holding us up. But next week when Alice is in New York I should have the time to get everything sorted out and started. I still have to set up the servers and ...” He trails off and looks away, scratching his head rather self-consciously. No rambling allowed for the wicked.

“And all that stuff. You know. Geek stuff.”

I nod even though I don't really know, and neither do I care. Devoid of any other topic than work, we fall silent again and more agonizing minutes pass.

“Did you see the Mariners game last Sunday?” he suddenly pipes up, sounding nearly glad that he found something else to say. Or at least he seems like that to me.

“Nope. Double shift from Saturday till Sunday, and I was on call after that –

and they *did* call, so I didn't even catch the re-runs.”

“That's nasty. Was a good game.” I have no idea if the note of sympathy in his voice is real. It doesn't matter anyway.

More silence, but now it's a hint more relaxed. Those twenty sentences are more than we've spoken in – forever. As much as I hate to be sitting here, I feel weirdly melancholic all of a sudden. For years we've been hanging out most of our free time, rooming together since college. And now all we can talk about is work and some stupid baseball game.

The more I think of that, the more uncomfortable I am, and just to get rid of that feeling I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind.

“How are things with you and Alice? I mean -”

I trail off there because what I want to ask him is if it was worth all the shit, but he gets it without me having to actually voice the words. A somewhat guarded look haunts his eyes for a moment, but then he smiles, and it's the first real emotion that Jazz has shown the whole evening until now.

“Seriously, she drives me crazy, but that's Alice. Wouldn't want to change a single thing, even if I could.”

I don't know why, but his words take a few moments to draw that animalistic pain from deep in my chest, and until then I actually feel myself being happy for them. Maybe Alice is right, maybe they really *are* soulmates and meant to be together. Bella certainly thinks they deserve each other, and right now I agree. If he's what Alice wants, she should be happy with Jazz. And for a few seconds I can even admit that I kind of want to see him happy, too.

But then the rational part of my brain is lost to the rage and agony crashing over me like a tidal wave, and the urge to punch him until he's paid for what he's done is nearly overwhelming. Only the fact that, despite whatever he was trying to accomplish, Bella's love for me was strong enough to cut

through his plans is holding me back. If nothing else I owe her enough to honor her forgiveness, even though I don't understand it. For her I can keep it together, if not get over things as fast as everyone expects me to.

While I do a good job holding myself in check, I don't doubt that the look on my face must be murderous, and after a few moments Jazz's words confirm that suspicion.

“Fuck, Edward, you know how I meant that, I didn't want to -”

“I know exactly how you mean it,” I bite back and make eye contact with him to underline my words. “Trust me, I'm living with the results of your little plan every fucking day, and I'm the only one who has had to bear all the fucking consequences!”

Thankfully the girls come back before I can say anything still more embarrassing, and the weird look on Jasper's face helps only so much to tide over the grim feelings still fighting for dominance inside me. The moment Bella slips into her seat I get up, in terrible need of letting off some steam any way I can.

“Drinks, ladies? What so you think of a round of shots to start the evening off, on me?”

Bella graces me with a long look but nods immediately, and Alice follows suit. No one mentions the evident hostility the girls have come back to, so I try my best to play things down.

“Let me guess, three shots of tequila, and what can I bring you, dearest Alice mine?”

For some reason or other she's scowling again, but I know that tequila just makes her sick, while it's been the drug of choice for the rest of us.

“Jazz and I both take a shot of gin.”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek hard not to burst out laughing, and can somehow still turn that into a smirk when Jasper's shoulders sag in a mute sigh where Alice can't see it, but he nods.

“Gin for me, too, please.”

Bella blinks in irritation, knowing as well as I do that Jazz only drinks gin –

preferably warm – when he has to make himself hurl, but apparently the leash Alice put around his neck is tight enough that he doesn't dare speak up against her.

I nod and take off towards the bar, aiming for the straightest line I can manage. Our waitress is now mixing drinks there, and I place my order –

four shots of tequila oro and two shots of gin. I tip her extra for asking if we want salt and limes, or cinnamon and oranges, and I tell her to put both in the tray. While she's busy slicing the orange I chuck down two of the tequila shots, not bothering with the whole ritual but welcoming the raw burn down my throat and straight into my stomach.

“Let me guess, one of the girls has been the other's girlfriend, right? Only rivalry over some pussy can get guys this riled up.” I stare at her, but her bright grin doesn't even falter.

“Nope. Good guess, but completely off.”

The waitress taps one lacquered nail against the wood of the bar.

“That's weird, really, because I remember you two being pretty tight. I mean your friend's Jasper Whitlock, and you're Edward Cullen.” I'm not even surprised that she knows Jazz, I wouldn't even be surprised to find out that she *knows* him, but usually his skanks don't recognize me, and I'd certainly remember her if she'd been one of our few *mutual pickups*.

Contrary to him I remember all the faces and names of the girls I've fucked.

I still have to ask, out of curiosity.

“Oh, I've been working at Zero's before I got the job here, I remember you guys hanging out there sometimes. Come to think of it,” she muses, then puts the small dish with the orange and lime slices next to the shots before she reaches for a pen and napkin.

“If either, or both, of you guys find yourself alone without the ladies, give me-”

“Don't even bother,” I cut her off rudely, my voice harsh enough to make her stop in mid scrawl. When she eyes me askance, I feel a little bad for being so nasty, but I don't want Bella to know about this, and I certainly don't trust Jazz.

“I'm engaged, and his relationship is pretty serious, you'd just wait forever for a call that will never come.”

A shrewd look lights up her face and her smile is bordering on dirty, but she throws the napkin right into the trash.

“Too bad. Or what is it they say, all the good guys are either married, or they're gay.”

I don't know why, but her words hit a little too close to home. I shrug them off as I pick up the small tray.

“Whatever.”

I try to shake off the feeling that she's still smirking at me as I make my way back to the others, and thankfully the air has cleared in my short absence.

Bella is ecstatic that I remembered her new habit of drinking tequila, picked up from some German exchange student who was been interning over the summer at her job and gleefully reaches for the cinnamon. Bella is nibbling on her orange slice before she finishes the second one off, all the while glancing at me from the corner of her eye. I'm pretty sure that means that she has an idea why there were four slices for only two shots, but I don't care. Three shots in as many minutes zoom right into

my blood stream, and my grumpiness starts to dissolve.

I'm not afraid of getting drunk, I even welcome it. I'm more prone to say something I will regret later when I'm sober, as my mind is more easily distracted by the beautiful woman leaning into me when I'm intoxicated, and distracted is good. The girls keep giggling over something for a while, but before long I can't keep my hands to myself. When she feels my bare palm slide over her lower back underneath her top, Bella grins at me, then she takes my other hand and tugs me off my chair and towards the dance floor.

Her eyes are glinting with mischief when we reach the dance floor, and the next moment she turns around and rubs her ass shamelessly against my thighs and crotch. I'm instantly hard, and for now only too ready to forget we're not quite on our own here. Bella laughs delightedly when I grab her hips and start to move with her, and I have a feeling that the night might be picking up from here on.

Chapter 9

The hypnotic rhythm of the music around me. The warm, willing body pressed against my own. Movement, slow and sensual, fast and passionate. It only takes a few minutes for me to lose myself until I can let go and just enjoy.

Dancers are all around us, and many of them are moving with more skill than we are, but there are too many people here to dance for real. I don't care, and Bella doesn't seem to either, as she's laughing and grinning at me when she isn't molding herself against me.

I'm drunk, horny and am with the most beautiful woman in the world, who is still sore from when I fucked her right into incoherency, life should be good.

And thanks to the booze burning in my veins, for now it is.

I try to behave myself at first, but Bella is rubbing her ass against me whenever she can, which is more often than I'm used to, and I've never been one to pass up such an invitation. Her laughter turns husky when I run my hands up and down her thighs, then pull her firmly against me with her back flush with my chest. Her skin is hot under my palms when I let them roam up and under her top.

The atmosphere in the room must be affecting her just like it is me as she doesn't even tense up, but instead throws her head back against my shoulder so that her hot breath is blowing over my neck. I normally keep any public displays of affection to a healthy minimum, but tonight I just can't. She is so soft and warm, and I'm feeling as if I would die if I couldn't hold her right now.

Bella rasps out the most delicious moan when my palms skim up her stomach and my cock grows painfully hard.

"I need you," I whisper into her ear and her answering moan goes right to my dick. "I want you. Right now. So fucking much." She moans again, and when I turn my head I see that her eyes are closed, a blissed out look on her face. I know how much she loves it when I talk dirty to her, and as I'm still not drunk enough to take her right here on the dance floor, I express my desire to do so through hushed words and wet kisses all over her bare shoulder.

"Do you have any idea how horny you make me?"

Her chuckle, nearly innocent but not quite, makes things even worse. Then her hand is on my knee, running up my thigh until it is between our bodies, and she discreetly rubs my crotch.

"Hmm, a little?"

I snarl playfully and scrape my teeth over the sensitive spot on her neck until she starts to shiver.

"Just a little? I think I have to elaborate on that then. You make my cock so fucking hard it's almost painful to keep myself in check, but you know how much I get off on that. And I can't fuck you right

here because that would be too easy. But I could play with your delicious tits in the meantime, would you like that?"

To heighten the impact of my words I move my hands away from her bare skin and place them on her waist over the thin fabric, inching higher slowly.

Bella's resulting panting breath is as needy as if I were actually screwing her, and I wonder if I can make her come from talking and tame touching alone. But she doesn't really answer me, so I bite into her neck, using just enough pressure to make her feel my teeth but not seriously hurt her. She groans, but it's a wanton sound, and not for the first time I marvel what I've done to deserve a girl like her.

"I guess that's a clear yes. Just thinking of how sensitive your nipples are right now makes me want to jizz my pants. How delicious your moans will be when I kiss them. Lick them. Suck on them. Bite them." Because I'm a mean fucker I brush the backs of my hands over her tits in a deliberately idle gesture, feeling her nipples harden under the thin barrier of the top. I know she's not wearing a bra, and the temptation to grab her tits and roll her nipples between my fingers is overwhelming. So is her response to my words, a guttural moan that is so primal that I decide on the spot that I just can't wait until we're home, or even out of the club to make true of my words.

I switch my grip to her hips and start to move us both through the crowd of dancers towards one of the darker, more reclusive corners of the club, all the while rubbing myself along her body as much as I can. Bella is melting in my arms, playing along, and five minutes and two songs later we finally reach the edge of the dance floor. I really don't trust what is staining these walls so I push her up against the railing of a staircase leading to the upper floor, and drink in the expression on her face. Her lips are parted slightly, her eyes wide from alcohol and lust alike, and the light sheen of sweat that's covering her body is begging to be licked off.

Her arms reach up to my head and a moment later my body is crushed against hers, my tongue deep in her mouth while my fingers dig into her ass. She tastes of Bella and tequila, and the desire to do some body shots off her tits is occupies my mind for a moment. I restrain myself from enacting that this very minute by kissing a wet line down from her lips over her chin and throat, staying there for a moment to lick along her clavicle before I move lower.

Right now I don't care who sees us, and I'm trusting that Bella thinks along the same lines as I do, or has the common sense to stop me before I can do something that goes against her grain. She certainly doesn't protest when I grab her tits and push them together, then bury my face between them, kissing and licking the sumptuous flesh. A little fumbling and I get my fingers into her top from the sides so I can tease her nipples. Her chest is heaving and a string of profanity leaves her lips that makes me want to tear off her clothes and fuck her right here and now.

One of her hands is in my hair, the other on my shoulder, her nails digging into my skin almost painfully, but she's clearly enjoying what I'm doing to her. Her moaning gets almost obscenely loud when I finally free one of her nipples and greedily suck it into my mouth. She's so responsive tonight, and I'm determined to use that to my advantage. Pretty much the only thing I can still think of is how good it will feel when I thrust into her warm, wet cunt, and lost in that all consuming desire I reach down to undo the button of her pants.

Only that I never actually get her fly open because her fingers wrap around my wrists and effectively stop me in mid motion. I whine and try to shake her off, but she's clearly doing the stopping I was hoping she would do earlier, only that now it's most unwelcome.

“Edward, stop! You need to

we need to

Alice and Jazz will be looking

for us!”

Her words hit me like a freight train, and I need a few seconds to drag my mind out of the gutter and her panties. When I look into her face I see that she's flushed and worked up, but her eyes are pleading with me, and she's clearly not asking for my cock.

A wave of rejection follows the initial confusion, and even though the very small part of me that is in fact still able to do some thinking is telling me that she's not rejecting *me*, it hurts. So. Fucking. Much.

Rationality quickly follows my horniness into the abyss, and I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose in order to restrain myself. I don't know what exactly I want to do, but the need to lash out is slowly becoming overwhelming, and if not for the booze slowing my thoughts and reactions, I might have said a few choice words I should never utter to the woman I love.

I'm just getting a grip on myself when Bella goes on, and frustration is leaking into the maelstrom of emotions inside of me as I helplessly watch her rearrange her outfit.

“We really can't do this, and you know it! We've been gone far too long already, and you know how much Alice resents being left behind. And it didn't look like she could push Jazz into dancing with her when you dragged me off oh so subtly.”

“Fuck Alice! I don't give a shit what she thinks or feels!” Bella's mouth drops open, and she just stares at me for a moment.

“You don't really mean that,” she replies flatly, and the guarded look suddenly on her face only fuels the rage inside of me. Of course I don't mean it, but that's exactly the problem. And right now I'm too angry to explain.

“Like hell I don't! I didn't want to come here in the first place but I went because of *you*. Now I want fifteen minutes alone with you, and don't tell me you're any less wound up than I am, because I'm pretty sure that by now you've drenched your underwear and pants from being so fucking wet!”

A low blow, and I kind of wish I could take back the words spilling from my mouth, but at least now Bella's angry with me and no longer holding back.

“Fuck you, Cullen!”

Okay, she's *really* angry when she's resorting to a last name basis, but I don't care. I know I deserve that anger, but it doesn't help our situation.

“I wish! But you'd rather hang out with that moron and his overbearing, annoying bitch!”

Now her face is draining of color, and I know I've overstepped my limits.

Shit. But there's nothing I'm willing to say that can get me out of this now.

“Did you just call Alice a bitch?”

Her voice is deceptively calm but her eyes are alive with anger, and I absent-mindedly note that her fists are clenched and she's shaking slightly.

“Yes, I did, do I have to spell it out for you? What else do you call a woman who's behaving like she is? We're freaking tiptoeing around her as if we cheated on *her*! We can't even crack the slightest joke, and don't tell me she didn't rip you a new one after that word vomit of yours?”

“It's none of your business what she said to me. And I can't believe the shit you're saying! God, it's like I don't even know you! I'm pretty sure Jazz never talks about me like this, you know?”

Two low blows in as many sentences, and while I try hard not to, now my anger's redirecting itself at Bella.

“Are you stupid or what? Did you already forget what he told Alice in order to land with her? He blamed it all on you, and *I'm* sure he also used choice words like cunt or whore in that tale, too!”

The agony in her eyes makes me want to apologize instantly, but I'm just telling her things she should know. And it's not like I said that about her, but I shouldn't have to repeat it. Right now her forgiveness only adds to the rejection I'm feeling, and I just can't take any more of this. I need to get away from here if I don't want to ruin all the civility I've scraped together today.

“I think it's best if I go now. Home. Care to accompany me?” Maybe I should've used a less condescending tone, as Bella's jaw is suddenly set as she glares at me.

“You know what? I think that's a good idea, in fact it's the first sensible thing I've heard from you tonight. Go home, Edward. But I'm staying here, I won't let your inane jealousy ruin my life and the bond I have with my best friends.”

I don't want to leave without her, but I know that it will take a while for her to snap out of that stubborn mood. Anything I say now will fall on deaf ears, so I might as well spare my breath.

“Awesome, have it your way! But don't come crying to me later when Alice keeps spewing her hostile comments at you, you've made your bed, now sleep in it!”

At least she's not alone in putting her foot in her mouth, but now the fact that I'm not quite sober is in her favor, as my words don't shut her up as I've hoped. Instead she gloats at me, and I definitely don't

like the fire that's returning to her eyes.

“You know what, if I had a thread less of dignity I would so take that verbatim and go back to Alice and Jazz and ask them if I can sleep over.

Preferably in their bed. Alice might balk at first, but you know that she's never really revoked her invitation to make out with me. And I've been okay with Jazz as a side dish with you, don't think that has changed all that much. Good night, Edward, and sleep tight!”

I'm simply too stunned and hurt by her words to respond in time, and when I find my voice again Bella has already turned on her heel and is stalking through the crowd over to our table. I want to cry, shout, rage, and rant, but I know that I'll only make things worse if I follow her. So I do the only thing that I can do – and go home.

My mind is comfortably numb during the bus ride home, but when I open the door and walk into the empty condo, it all comes rushing back. Her words, the disbelief in her voice, the malice in her eyes – and confronted with the choice of curling up to die or throwing a fit, I let my anger consume me. I feel like smashing something, but I know that once I've cooled down, giving in will only make me feel worse, so I quickly change into my shorts and running shoes and take off.

It's past midnight, it's raining, and I'm miserable even before I'm as wet as a dog, but my rage keeps me warm. Soon the last residues of the tequila are burned up and my mind kicks into overdrive, and just to shut up the voices in my head I push myself harder and harder until I'm running at full speed, and all that's left is the screaming burn in my muscles.

Eventually all my energy is spent, and I simply can't run anymore. I stop and bend over, trying to get some air into my lungs while my head spins from exhaustion. My whole body is quivering, and I'm so thirsty that even the water in the puddles looks enticing. Once I'm able, I straighten and raise my face into the rainy darkness, letting the water hit my hot skin.

I have no idea where I am, some industrial area. I vaguely remember that I didn't take my phone with me, just my keys, but right now I don't care. I start walking, and a while later I recognize one of the buildings. I'm just a few minutes from Rose and Emmett's, and I shake my head over the direction my subconscious has led me. While seeming a very unlikely voice of reason, Rose has always been there for me when I needed to work something out. She's a good listener, and she has no filter when it comes to set my head straight. She'll know what to do. She'll help me get my head out of my ass again.

The flaw in my plan occurs to me as I get closer to my new destination.

Rose is seven months pregnant, bitchy as hell, and is in her right mind to blow me off when I show up at her doorstep at what I presume must be 2

AM by now. But maybe she'll be gracious and call me a cab so I can get home at least.

I'm nearly at their door when I see light coming from one of the windows behind the small balcony that opens onto the street, and when I crane my neck, I see a hulking shape up there, staring into the

night. It strikes me as peculiar to see Emmett out there in the middle of the night, but who am I to talk? I call up to him, and after a moment he leans forward and squints down into the night.

“Is that you, Edward?”

“In the soaking wet flesh! Hey bud.”

“Hey there yourself,” he replies, keeping his voice pitched low now. “You do realize that it's 2:30 and raining cats?”

I've noticed, but I seriously don't have the will for banter anymore, nor the energy.

“Yeah. Can I call a cab? I'm kind of in need of a ride home.”

“I have a much better idea!”

And he's gone, stepping inside. Barely a minute later he comes out of the house, a blanket and a pack of cigarettes in his hands. He nods at his Jeep parked at the curb, then hands me the blanket before getting inside.

“Just don't get anything too wet. Rose abhors that wet dog smell.” I roll my eyes at him but put the blanket onto the seat before I climb inside.

Em cranks the window down and lights a Camel before he starts the car.

“Since when do you smoke?”

“On and off since Junior High. Promised Rosie I would give up for good once the baby's here, and she's had some weird cramps earlier this week so I figured I might as well make good of that pack before the little bugger is early and deprives me of my last guilty pleasure for the next eighteen years.”

He's grinning while he says it, his face lighting up when he mentions his wife and child alike. Reminds me of the day when Rose got her test results back and tracked me down at the hospital, hugging me and crying with joy for a full fifteen minutes. I don't think either of us doubted Em when he told her that he didn't care if the kid was his or not, but of course it was a relief for everyone when the test came back a positive match.

I've been wondering for years what Rose saw in him, as I never thought that a woman of her intellect and snide tongue would ever be happy with such a big, goofy teddy bear, but of course there's more to him than his easy way and linebacker build. Evident sexual compatibility aside, he's one thing above everything else – loyal. I don't think Rose will ever have reason to doubt his undying love and devotion for her, and I'm sure they'll stick together till the bitter end, come what may. I wish I could say the same for Bella and me, but we already proved to ourselves that we'll always have to fight to achieve as much as Em and Rose have now.

The thought makes me even more morose, and for a moment I have trouble breathing. I'm still convinced that I did the right thing, but I know I've made an ass of myself, and Bella won't

necessarily extend unlimited forgiveness to me.

“Spill, whatcha doing out here at this god forsaken hour? And don't tell me you needed to burn off some energy, I know you two have better ways of accomplishing that.”

I send him a long look, but am simply too tired for joking.

“We fought. I stormed off. Then ran until I couldn't go on any longer. End of story.”

Em stops at a red light and glances at me for a moment.

“That bad, huh?”

“I honestly don't know. Probably.”

At his raised brow I shrug.

“We've been out with Jazz and Alice. I lost it, said some things Bella won't let me forget for a while, but so did she. She didn't want to go home with me, so I left her there and went alone. I couldn't stand to just sit there in the dark and wait for her, so I went for a run.”

“First fight?”

I want to laugh at the notion at first, but then realize that he's right, it really is our first fight. With all the drama I often forget that it's only been a few months for us, and even though we've fought before, we've never had *that* kind of fight.

“I guess so.”

“Always hits you the hardest. And is usually over something pretty stupid, huh?”

Or it's something really important, and you fuck it up even more than it already was, but I don't really feel like sharing that bit with him. It's bad enough that Rose filled him in on the details after the whole thing with Jazz blew up in my face. At least he's not teasing me too much about it.

“You know, it takes a lot more than some stupid behavior and angry remarks for Bella to be seriously pissed off with you? She just doesn't eat it all up anymore.”

“I'm not concerned about her being pissed off.”

As I say the words, I realize that they're true. I can deal with her being cranky after what I've said. What I can't deal with is the reason why everything got that bad.

“Ah. Sounds like there's more to this.”

“Maybe.”

“You still keeping up your denial routine?”

“You all sound like a broken record. I'm not the one who's in denial!” My temper's flaring again, and I want to wipe the stupid grin off Emmett's face, but when he glances at me again his look is full of compassion.

“It'd be so much easier if it were just that, eh?” I agree, wholeheartedly. I wish my problem were something as easy as me running away from what happened, or how I feel about it. I could go see some therapist or other about that, and before long they'd diagnose me all healed once I coughed up the details.

“What ya gonna do about it? You know how the girls are, they always want to talk about shit.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I pause for a moment and glance outside into the pouring rain. “But what do I tell her when I've said everything there is to say again and again? Can't really make something up just for the sake of saying something new, right?”

Em shrugs.

“You know her better than anyone else. Just tell her what she wants to know, what she needs to hear. Sometimes it's as easy as telling her that you love her, and it'll all be good. It's not like you fucked up for real again, right?”

I don't like the cautious note in his voice, as if he's somehow afraid that it's not a rhetorical question. I try to come up with a witty reply, but I'm simply too exhausted to care. In the meanwhile he's slowing down at the curb and puts the car into park in front of our house. Before I can get my foot into my mouth again, Em continues.

“I know you probably don't think I know a thing about your problems, but I've seen my share of shit go down around me in the last few years. Just tell Bella how you feel about things. And I don't mean some flowery girl talk shit. The truth, plain and simple. Don't blame her, the jackass, or even yourself. I'm sure she's heard all about it already. She can make up her mind on her own when she has all the facts. But she can't really understand you if all she ever hears is how you want her to see things, no?”

He's right, and it's embarrassing how true his words are. I mean what he's telling me should be obvious, but the more I think of it, the more I see how Bella's reaction to what I've said makes sense. Now I'm frustrated with myself, and I hide my face in my hands for a moment.

“I'm just so freaking tired of everyone expecting me to fuck up.” Em's laughter rings loud inside the car, and he's reaching for another cancer stick.

“Tell her that, too. You know that Bella's the only one that counts, so why care about anyone else's expectations?”

I nod, and with a heavy sigh reach for the door handle.

“Thanks, man. And not just for the ride.”

“You're welcome! Just don't fuck up again, eh?”

Chuckling under my breath I get out, and Em swerves right back into traffic.

I stare up at the house for a moment, trying to decide what to do now, but really, there's just one option. I can only hope that whatever went down after I took off hasn't riled her up even more. Resigning myself to my fate, I walk inside, and hopefully not into war.

Chapter 10

The condo is dark and empty when I tiptoe upstairs, but the distinct shape of Bella under the covers makes me let out a breath I hadn't realized I've been holding. Not that I've believed her hilarious threat about a threesome with Alice and Jazz for a moment, but just seeing her back in our bed is a relief.

I see her stiffen as I enter the bedroom but her eyes are tightly shut, and I can read the signs alright. She's avoiding me, pretending to be asleep, and the way she subtly shifts until her back is turned to me is rather telling. I sigh and pad on into the bathroom to dump my wet clothes in the washer and take a quick, hot shower to stop myself from shivering.

While the hot spray is beating down onto my shoulders I let my head sink down until my forehead is pressed against the tiles. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Once I'm moderately warmed up I step out of the shower and towel myself dry a little too roughly. I know I'll be sore tomorrow all over if I don't stretch now, but I don't think Bella will appreciate it if I need another twenty minutes here. So I do the quick routine while I brush my teeth, then return to the bedroom and slip under the covers next to her.

I don't know what to do now. Any other night I would shimmy closer to her and then wrap myself around her, pressing her into my body until we're as close as we can get. But she's still tense and clearly doesn't want me that close tonight, so I remain lying on my back and stare at the shadows spanning across the ceiling above me.

“Now you don't even want to touch me anymore?”

I close my eyes at the accusation in her tone, and because I'm a moron, of course I heave a loud sigh. I know it's the wrong thing to do, and I can see her pissed off frown before me as if I were looking at her, but I can't take it back.

“You know that I always want to touch you. In fact, you're the one who doesn't appreciate being touched.”

I have no idea why I say that but my filters are still down and I can't seem to get anything right. At least now she's facing me, but her glare is murderous.

“There's a difference between touching and attacking someone in public!”

“Yeah like you did so much protesting in the first case!” Her eyes narrow and I can see the muscles in her jaw stand out as she gnashes her teeth.

“I probably didn't. So what. Doesn't change the fact that you're still acting like a total jerk! Do you have any idea how worried I was when I came home and you weren't here? And then I called your cell and it was ringing in the bedroom?”

Groaning I drag my arm over my eyes and count to ten slowly to try to get rid of the reply burning on my tongue.

“Look, I'm sorry you were worried, okay? But I had to burn off some energy, and going for a run was about the only thing I could think of doing.”

“You could have left a fucking note!”

Her anger is dwindling slowly, and now she's more petulant than hurt. I sigh again, not the best answer but better than the one that I want to hurl at her.

Silence falls until she sighs herself.

“You missed quite something. Jazz got pretty wasted, and Alice nearly bit his head off when he told her to ease up a little.”

“I doubt I missed anything worth listening to then.” Another sigh, now more exasperated, but she inches a little closer so that we're no longer separated by half of the empty bed between us. I expect her to be still pissed at me, but she rather looks worried.

“Seriously, this can't go on like this. You're just making us all miserable with the way you're acting.”

“So now it's my fault all over again?”

I have no idea why I've said that, but I'm not willing to take it back, either, not to ease the sting of my words. Bella narrows her eyes at me, but she remains calm.

“We're not talking about blame here, but you have to admit that you were hostile nearly the whole evening through, until you pretty much lost it. It's so unlike you to lose control like that, I mean, I still can't believe you said all those things.”

At a loss for words I remain silent, and wait for her to go on. Her eyes skit over my face, looking for something, but she clearly doesn't find it as she goes on after a few moments.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“About what?”

Bella sighs exasperatedly.

“About why you were behaving like a jerk? And why you ran off? I'm kinda used to my life turning into a soap opera at times, but usually you're the one I can depend on not to act like a lunatic. It grates that you did exactly that tonight.”

The sensible thing would be to apologize and tell her it won't happen again, but I'm too cranky to give in so easily.

“Melodramatic much? Yes, I admit, I haven't been the most sensible guy around, but I've been in very good company tonight.” Anger glints in her eyes.

“And just because everyone is jumping off the bridge, you're next?”

“If everyone is jumping, why do you blame me for joining in?” I can see that my line of reasoning doesn't sit well with her.

“I just don't get it, you know? For years you've never let anyone get to you like that, and suddenly you go off on the smallest of jibes. That's just not you.”

“Well maybe it was time I went off a little more then?” This is so going down, but I really don't know how to stop this conversation from escalating. It's incredibly frustrating, and I can see that Bella is struggling with the exact same problem.

“Look, I'll try to do better next time. Or just don't come with you, okay?”

Happy now?”

“No, of course I'm not happy!” she sighs, then turns onto her back and rubs her eyes with the balls of her hands.

“Christ, this is so ridiculous! How could it ever come this far?”

“Do you really want an answer for that?”

She stills in mid-motion, then turns her head and looks at me.

“Actually, if you have an answer that's more sufficient than 'Duh!' I'd really like to hear it.”

Her tone is weirding me out a little, so serious that she sounds nearly solemn, but I'm too far gone to care whether this is a trap or not.

“Okay. But trust me, you won't like it.”

“Edward, I'm your girlfriend. Whatever is important enough for you to go all ape-shit crazy is something I *need* to hear.” As usual it rankles that she designates herself as my *girlfriend*, but I know the point is moot. And really, I'm already acting so much like a girl that I can't protest over *this* now unless I want her to kick me out and tell me to grow some.

“Good.” One word in, and I have to stop. Fuck, this whole mess is so complicated that it's hard to find a point where I can start explaining.

Months and months of bullshit to sort through don't just let themselves be explained in two sentences.

“Spit it out. I'm too tired for diplomacy anyway. Just tell me what got to you like that.”

I know she doesn't really want me to do that, but I appreciate her attempt. I still try to come up with something better, but after a moment decide to for once heed her words, verbatim.

“I just hate how you all are able to just forget what Jazz has done, while you shove all the blame at me.”

“No one does that.”

I glare at her. “Yeah, right. Ever listened to yourself?” My words clearly hurt her, but I quickly go on before she can respond.

“But it's not just you, have you listened to Alice of late? She's behaving as if we were mere acquaintances and not friends of over a decade. Whatever I do is wrong, whatever I say is frowned upon, while you both fall over yourselves to fawn over this jackass who doesn't deserve your forgiveness!

I won't say I haven't earned my share of scorn, but seriously, do you even realize how much your behavior hurts me?”

It feels oddly good to voice the words, even though I know that in so doing I'm hurting her in turn. The only indication that my guess was right is a slight tightening of her lips, but Bella's eyes remain trained on mine.

“And that makes you so hateful?”

“Not hateful,” I try to explain. “It's just unfair. It feels as if I took all the blame and ever since I try to redeem myself but no one even gives me a chance, while he doesn't have to worry about the consequences of his actions. And don't tell me that what he did compares in any way to what I did. You know that I will always be sorry for being so weak, but it was one moment of stupidity. I really don't want to sweet-talk what I did, but seriously, it's as tame as cheating goes, while he led me on, he seduced me, he planned this whole freaking thing to break us up and it took him fucking months to even apologize to you, that's in no relation to anything.” I kind of expect her to get angry with me now, but there's only sadness in her eyes when she reaches for me to cup my cheek in her hand. I turn my head a little and place a soft kiss onto her palm before I put my hand on hers, and for a moment just drink in the warmth of her closeness.

“Edward, please believe me, I know. I really do. But I can't change things.

Please don't make me choose between the two of you.” Her words make my heart stop for a moment, but even before I can open my eyes again she resumes talking.

“You know that I will always choose you. Because I love you, and you're my everything. But he's my friend, and except you he's the only other guy I feel that comfortable with. I've said it before but if you need to hear it again, I will never forget what he did. There are times when I get so mad at him that I have to control myself not to hunt him down and slap him until the pain goes away. But I can hold on to this anger, I can't make myself miserable forever just because he acted like the idiot we both know

he sometimes is. I haven't forgiven him for his sake, but solely for my own, because I want to be whole, for you, I want to stop regretting things. It's in the past, and it should stay there. And I think you should do the same. I know, it's a lot to ask, but you're only hurting yourself.”

“That might make sense to you, but it certainly doesn't make sense to me.” Bella sighs and slowly extracts her hand from mine. I don't want to let go as the gesture seems oddly significant, but if she doesn't want to, I can't hold her.

“And that's all?”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugs.

“So you're just resentful because you think we're all treating you unfairly because we don't loath Jazz with a vengeance?”

“Thanks for making me seem like a petulant child now on top of everything else.”

I know I should have taken that peace offering, but I just can't. She wants the truth, she can have it.

“And it's that's not 'all', as you so pointedly phrased it. I hate him, and I can't stand to see you so close to him. Physically and emotionally. Call me jealous, but tonight you picked him over me, like you always do. If he had earned to be the best friend I will always stay in competition with that would be fine, but he has done the complete opposite and still you take his side, bend over backwards not to egg on somewhere, while I have to deal with that.”

“Could you please stop being so unreasonable?” I just glare at her, but her temper is rearing its head now, too, because she sits up and frowns at me.

“What's next, you going to forbid me to see him just so that you can feel like you're the only man in my life?”

Her words hit me hard, but at least they sober me up. I know it's only a matter of time until she gets unreasonable, and I really don't want to fight right now. I'm tired of this, and I'm tired of having to justify speaking my feelings when she asks for them. So I get up and grab my pillow and the folded up comforter and turn to leave.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“I'm going to sleep downstairs on the couch. See you in the morning.”

“No, you're not! Edward, come back, we're having this conversation now and -”

The rest of her sentence is cut off when I close the door behind me, maybe a little too forcefully, and drag my sorry ass down into the living room. I'm not yet done sweeping the throw pillows off the sofa so that I can lie down when the door is wrenched open and Bella comes stomping down the stairs, a

grumpy vision in a flimsy nighty.

“You can't run out on me just because what I'm saying is uncomfortable for you to hear!”

She's livid, and her accusation makes my own temper flare.

“Last time I looked I could still do whatever I wanted!”

“Maybe that's the problem, you can't! Because now it's no longer you, but us! Although right now I have the strong feeling that all this shit is hitting the fan because you're an egotistical asshole!”

I can't really tell her to fuck off, although I'm tempted.

“Bite me. You're the one dishing out weird accusations, trying to make me seem worse than I am – while you claim to be any different!” She steps up to the couch and towers over me, and I'm so angry that I only notice in passing that the lace of the nighty is rather see through.

“Weird accusations? You want weird accusations, here you have one! I strongly believe that the only reason you're acting like a crazy idiot is that you've still got feelings for him! And I don't mean of the friendly, platonic kind!”

“Are you fucking insane? Do you even listen to a thing I say? I hate that freaking idiot, and if I never see him again it's still too soon!” My answer shuts her up, and I wonder if her anger isn't somewhat exaggerated so she can weasel some kind of confession out of me. It's not like Bella to do that, but she's had months to come up with her own crazy ideas, and neither of us is exactly rational right now.

“But he's been your friend ever since we moved here for college! You can't really hate him that much just because -”

I don't let her finish her sentence, although the desperation in her voice actually frightens me a little.

“Don't you see? I despise him exactly *because* he's been my friend for so long!”

“But his plan didn't really work, we're still together, and happy, and I think that we've grown so much closer because of all that shit. Doesn't that kind of, you know, take the sting away a little?”

I stare up at her while I try to hold on to my rage, but her voice is almost broken now, and the need to hold and comfort her is slowly wearing down my defenses.

“No, it doesn't. It was your love that made that possible, and until the very end he was trying to turn you against me. Do you even have the slightest clue how bad that weekend and the first few days afterwards were for me?” Her mouth opens but she doesn't say anything, and after a few moments she shakes her head.

“You never told me. You never tell me anything personal.” The accusation hurts, but for once I can't really say anything to prove her wrong.

“You actually told me you were happy I stopped moping after that Saturday at Beth's. That you were glad I was done with being so emo. And now you complain that I took your words to heart?”

“I didn't mean it like that! Yes, I admit it, having you lurk around and sulk for two weeks was hell! But that doesn't mean that I don't want you to tell me when something is bothering you!”

Silence falls, and it's nearly awkward. We both are at a loss for words, and I'd rather roll over and sleep now than continue this. But of course, Bella being Bella, she has other plans.

“Then tell me now? Maybe I understand why you don't even try to mend your friendship with Jazz again when I see the whole picture.” Her voice is calm but her eyes are pleading with me, and one thing I can never do, and that is refuse her anything she asks for. I sigh heavily, then pat the couch next to me and she quickly climbs over the back rest and sinks into the plush cushions.

Again I don't know where to start, and it doesn't get better as the more I think about it, the more memories and emotions threaten to come up from the dark place I've shut them all away in. Bella nudges my leg as if to tell me to just spit it out, and I decide that's probably the best idea. Again. After all, she knows enough that I don't have to chronologically order things.

“You know, I've always trusted him. Blindly. Too blindly, I know now, but until that day I never had any reason to doubt his loyalty. His friendship.

And it's not just that we always got along great, but there was a connection between us that's so hard to define, but it was there. I told you I had a crush on him – and before you start on that again, I really mean *had*, past tense – but I don't really know if that's a good description. There was *something* there, but it never felt even remotely like what I feel for you, so it was probably more like a ...” I cast around for words. “Yearning, for lack of a better expression. We were so close, we could talk about virtually everything, and I think it was probably just a need to take that to a more physical level.”

I can see that my words hurt her, but not the part about me wanting to fuck him, but the fact that I'm still reluctant to talk as freely with her as I used to with Jazz. But with him I never had to second guess or filter my words, because I knew I couldn't hurt him with anything I said.

“I mean it takes a lot for two guys who know each other that closely and who're both not entirely gay to share a girl, and fuck each other. Sex complicates things, usually, but it worked, somehow. Or at least I thought it did. Now I just wish that I'd never let him talk me into having even one threesome with you.”

Bella cocks her head and her expression becomes unreadable, but she motions me to go on, so I don't dwell on that point.

“Don't get me wrong, I know that what we did hurt you a lot. And I'm glad that you managed to get over it. But you weren't the only one who was hurt that day.”

My voice becomes weirdly thick, but I force myself to go on and keep eye contact with her.

“I told you what nearly killed me was the pain in your eyes. It did. Seeing what I'd done to you was

the worst thing that I ever felt, and I put all my efforts into taking that pain away again, any way I could think of. It was a problem that had a resolution, and we *did* resolve those issues, and I agree, in a twisted way the whole fuck up brought us closer together.

“But that aside, he hurt me, too. He abused my weakness, he violated my trust, of all the people in the world he was one of those who really knew me, and he used that knowledge to get to me. I could barely deal with that already, but then you had your talk with him, and the things you told me he said about me -”

I have to stop there to swallow, and for a moment I just want to curl into a ball and let go, but I can't, so I go on.

“I've come to terms with who I am and what I want a long time ago. I don't always like it, but I accept it. I know you love me not in spite of all that, but because of the man I am. And from all the people I call friends, Jazz is the one who knows all the gritty details, and who has known them longer than anyone else. I always thought he accepted me for who I am – with his usual jerk attitude, but you know how he is, he's only serious when it's bad, and that's never been the case. I mean I know he doesn't agree with everything, I know he's very uncomfortable about some of the things he knows I did, but I never thought that he only played that whole acceptance thing and in fact thinks I'm barely a step away from some kind of abusive monster.”

By the end of my speech my voice is only a hoarse whisper, and the look of compassion on Bella's face nearly makes me come undone. If we hadn't been fighting before, I would likely be a sobbing heap in her lap, but all the things we've spewed at each other tonight keep me moderately together.

“I don't think he really meant all that. It was just his last attempt to drive us apart.”

“But it makes sense!” I cry, my anger back in full force. “Back when the whole deal with Chelsea went down he barely said a thing, only called us a bunch of weirdos once, but ever since we hooked up he hasn't shut up about how rough I'm with you, that I'm pushing you too much, that he can't watch me do all that to you. He thinks you're some kind of fragile flower that can't speak up for herself and that what I do is borderline abusive! Why do you think we didn't do anything even remotely kinky in the last two threesomes? And don't tell me he's just not into it because I *know* he likes it rough, I've had plenty of opportunity to see him in action, and until it was about you, he's never had any objections to throw a girl onto the bed and fuck her within an inch of her life!”

I have no idea why that bothers me so much as it plays into my hands, after all it was one of Bella's reasons to be happy the whole group thing was over because she felt that the dynamics were off. Her face is back to that unreadable mask, but I figure that's mostly because she simply doesn't like it when I talk about what we were up to before her, which I understand. I normally try not to mention it, but she deserves to know the truth.

She still hasn't said a thing, so I sigh and go on, trying to somehow put a conclusion to my rant.

“Maybe you're right, maybe I need to deal with this shit. I think I just need time to get over it, forget what went down and learn to ignore the rest. Don't tell me that's unhealthy, or denial, because I'm not

denying anything here. I trusted him, he abused my gullibility. That he made me feel so helpless in all this like only Tanya before him doesn't help, but what's done is done. I have no intention of forgiving him, because in my eyes he doesn't deserve forgiveness, and he didn't do anything to indicate he even cares whether I forgive him or not. But don't expect me to be happy when you keep putting your need to fraternize with him over me. I will never tell you not to talk to him, or meet with him, but I think it would be the best thing if I simply stay away from him.”

Bella isn't happy with what I've told her, but she finally nods.

“I understand that. It's just so sad. I mean you were so close. If I hadn't come over that Sunday afternoon you'd likely still be-” I lean forward and quickly shush her up with a finger over her lips.

“Don't say that. You know that I'll always choose you over anyone else. I love you, and you're my life. If I could I would undo all the things I've done to hurt you, but I will always be grateful that I ended up with you. And I'll never let you go, so you better don't grow tired of me any time soon.” She smiles at that, but it's a weak gesture and clearly doesn't come from her heart.

“I don't intend to. Ever. Come back to bed with me now?” I hesitate for a moment, but when I see the sadness in her eyes increase I nod and gather my things up.

“Sure.”

Bella takes my free hand in hers and leads me back upstairs, where we cuddle together until she falls asleep a few minutes later. I wait until she's out cold before I extract my arm from under her head and leave the bedroom as silently as possible.

I have no idea how much time passes while I stand in front of the windows downstairs and stare at nothing. The sun comes up and shines through the few clouds that still remain from last night's rain showers, and everything looks clean and fresh and new. I wish I could feel the same about myself, watching the city wake up and greet the new day is weirdly depressing me.

I finally slump back into my bed where exhaustion overwhelms me, but while I can try to ignore my nagging brain while I'm awake, my dreams are full of things I wish I didn't have to remember.

Chapter 11

I have to wake up a lot sooner than I want to, which is no surprise as I only got into bed again five hours ago. Bella is moderately chipper this morning but trying not to be too obnoxious about it. I guess she feels like our talk last night has been some kind of important break through or something.

Maybe she's right, I can't say.

What I am is raw. I'm still feeling vulnerable, exposed, and that makes me edgy. I know it's stupid because Bella is the one person in my life I know I can trust with almost everything, and she's more than just accepting, but that doesn't change that I don't *want* to be weak.

The air between us is a little tense as if we're both stepping lightly around each other, trying to make sure not to unsettle the balance. There are several things I want to ask her, like what she thinks about my decision to try to simply avoid Jasper, but I'm not sure if now is the time for further discussions. I know the question will upset her, and I think she needs a little time to think things over and come to her own conclusions. I'm not delusional, I know she will try to hold on to this friendship, for whatever reason, but maybe we can find a common ground we can both live with.

Things definitely pick up over breakfast outside on the terrace, fresh air and sunshine chasing away the cobwebs that cloud my mind. Once we're done eating Bella's delicious pancakes she simply crawls onto my lap and we spend the next half hour kissing, then making sweet love right there on the new garden chair without bothering to undress fully. I lose myself in the sweet caresses and passionate kisses, needy for *her* – her taste, her scent, the warmth of her skin – rather than my own satisfaction. It doesn't feel like make-up sex, more as if she's comforting me further, knowing exactly what I need right now.

I love her, and she clearly loves me, but somehow this leaves me sad rather than happy. Not that she loves me, of course, but the fact that I should be more worthy of that love while I'm so obviously not.

I have to leave for work a short while later, and I'm nearly glad I can occupy my mind with something other than what happened yesterday.

Several hours later I'm trying to digest the health hazard that is our canteen food. No one I know and want to talk to is on break right then so I get my phone out instead of undergoing the tedium that is fraternizing with the enemy. I've never been that good with making new friends, that whole child prodigy and studying rather than doing sports thing doing its own to kill my social skills. I stare at my contact list – normally I would call Bella, but my call log is full to the brim with her name and I don't want to seem clingier than I actually am. Second place has always been either Alice or Jazz, but in the light of recent events I'm not keen on talking to either of them. So I call the next one in line – Rose.

She picks up on the second ring, and the first thing I hear is her shouting, rather loudly, at Emmett to please kill the sound of the playstation. My ears are still ringing when she finally acknowledges me.

"Hey, E, whatcha up to?"

"Hi Rose. Up until you were trying to deafen me I was taking a break from work, but now I might as well drag my sorry carcass over to the next otolaryngologist."

Her answer is her signature throaty laugh, followed by a sound that I presume stems from her biting into a gherkin.

"Oh, you think your slinging of fancy medical words impresses me? Bite me. You call on a Saturday evening and you better be prepared to hear some background noise! Be happy you didn't call while we were getting it on, with my whale ass that's a tremendous undertaking by now and produces all kinds of squeaks and pants." She stops, and the laughter returns to her voice. "Too much information?"

"Rose, I'm a doctor, you have to try a lot harder to weird me out."

"Okay, well then it will doubtlessly interest you that of late I'm always farting when Em is fucking me hard from behind, because quite frankly I can't really draw my knees up to my ginormous boobs anymore and -"

I try to just blank out the following recount while I chase a few errant peas across my plate.

"Doubtlessly this is very crucial information that you couldn't have lived without obtaining another day. Right, E?"

"You know me so well, it's daunting."

Again she laughs, and more gherkin munching ensues.

"So why are you really calling?"

"What makes you think this isn't just a social call? After all it's been a while since we talked."

"Sure, E, delude yourself. But one of these days it's gonna creep up on you and I'm sure I don't want to be around when all your shit comes back to haunt you. If it isn't already doing that, which I presume it is, in turn being the reason for your call. Am I about right?"

I hesitate, and that seems to be enough of an answer for her.

"Fuck, Edward, just spill it. You know that of all the people around I'm the one least prone to judge you for whatever you feel keeps dragging on your soul."

I want to protest but swallow those words before they can escape my mouth. She's right, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. My recent talk with Beth told me plainly that she'll sooner or later drag everything out of me, and while non-judgmental in so many things, Beth wouldn't understand why I can't talk about some things. To her, I'm just creating my own problems. Maybe I am. A little late I realize that Rose is, once again, the voice of wisdom. Probably a good thing she and Emmett hooked up so they can sass each other to death, between all the aforementioned noise production.

"I know."

My simple admission seems to stun her into silence, and seconds tick by before I hear her resume munching.

"Awesome that you haven't lost all of your sense along the way. So what's bothering you?"

I sigh, then I tell her what happened yesterday - trying at first to keep it all in the chronological order and without the inevitable subjective comments, but of course I fail. I somehow manage to keep my voice down and not curse Jazz six ways to Sunday, but I can tell that some of my more acerbic expressions cause a few highly amused snorts from Rose.

"Ah, I see," she surmises when I'm done, while I hear the fridge open and close in the background. "Guess that's not something you can fuck out of your system, feeling betrayed by your girl when all she's attempting to do is making it right for everyone around."

I try to keep my mouth shut, but of course I can't.

"She shouldn't try to please everyone. Just me."

I know I'm calling righteous anger down on myself with statements like that, but Rose only laughs at me.

"Yeah, you know, if you can talk her into going for the 24/7 thing so you can forbid her to ever talk to Jazz again you'd be rid of the whole problem.

Wouldn't that be the easy way out?"

"Because she'd tell me to fuck off and never come near her again? I guess."

Her mirth grates a little, but I know that Rose only means well.

"Good to see you at least know sometimes when you're acting like a total ass. But to be serious again, can you deal with the whole situation? Deal with Bella hanging out with Jazz while you're not there to make sure she doesn't do anything you don't want her to do?"

The idea is ridiculous to me, but her words nevertheless succeed in planting the smallest seed of doubt and suspicion.

"I know she wouldn't do anything like that. Even if she might slam it in my face when we're fighting, I don't think there's anyone who she'd be less interested in having an affair with than him."

"So it's really just that you feel like she should see reason and cut her ties with him because you don't want to see his lying, manipulative ass anymore? Sheesh, Edward, grow a pair! Might as well buy Bella another strap-on because I think you just got the anatomy for it!"

The mention of my girl and her new toy have the opposite effect on me than Rose probably intended, but I know what she meant by that.

"Is it too much to ask that she at least sees what she, and almost everyone else, is doing to me?"

I know I sound whiny when I say that, but the damage is done. Rose is quiet for a few moments as if she is debating with herself what to tell me, and when she talks again she's no longer taunting me.

"I think she really didn't see it. You know how Bella wants to live in her perfect world where you can be the love of her life and Jazz her best friend.

Don't hold it against her that she'd rather be a little ignorant than tear herself apart because she can't do miracles. But now you opened her eyes and I'm sure she will consider her actions better from now on. She loves you, and I'm sure she really meant it that she'd always choose you over him. Isn't that enough for you?"

Thinking about her words, I come to the usual conclusion that Rose should have gone into psychology rather than photography, but then she'd probably drive half of her clients to commit suicide with her insensitivity.

"Do you think it should be? That easy, just be happy and forget about what happened?"

"Not forget, E, forgive. Her, not him, I mean. Let her be something more than the clingy, dependent eye candy on your arm. You love her for the person she is, well, Jazz formed her like no one else. If you cut his influence off, will you still want the Bella that's left behind? You can't separate them without her hurting, can you say for yourself that you don't care? That you'd rather have her hurting but with you as the only man in her life, or you swallowing some of your pride so she can be happy with you the only man in her bed?"

Rose's tone tells me already that she knows that she has won. Keeping Bella from harm is the one argument that will beat everything else. And it's only then that I really see what Bella meant last night. She loves me enough to do what Rose just asked me to do - put her own happiness behind that of the person she cherishes above everything else - and I know I can't ask of her to do that. As much as everything in me is screaming to have Bella all to myself and completely removed from the influence of that bastard, I know I would put myself at the same step as him in doing so. It would be a manipulative move, aimed to alleviate my own insecurities while ignoring what she really wants. And I'd rather kill myself than do that.

Again.

"You still there?" Rose asks, her voice now soft. I nod, then sigh when I realize she can't see it.

"Sure."

"I guess your silence means my words have struck a chord."

"Or ten," I agree. She chuckles, but it's a sad sound.

"Guess that's what you needed? And the reason why you kept me from keeping myself well fed?"

"Like you ever stopped eating those gherkins!"

Now she's laughing again, but when she goes on her voice is still full of compassion.

"I can only say so much before it gets cheesy, but I think you need to get your priorities straight. Letting her see the big picture in all its gritty details was the first step. Now the ball's in her court, she has to make up her mind.

If you keep pushing her you'll always wonder if her decision was really her own. Do you want to live for the rest of your life wondering if what you perceive as happiness is only a compromise she made because you're more important to her than her own happiness is? I know, it's a stalemate, either way you're going to have to bite the bullet, but you know you got yourself into this situation when you got a little more gropey than you should have."

I hate it that of all the people, the woman I least want to fuck is the one who sees right through my shit. Or maybe that's the reason she has that uncanny knack.

"Thanks, Rose, I think I needed to hear that."

Another snort.

"Sure you did, sugar. And you know, if you ever feel like wanting to know my real opinion, you have but to ask."

She's told me that very thing several times since the shit hit the fan, and I have to admit, today I'm more tempted than ever to take her up on her offer. While judgmental as hell, Rose has been oddly objective about the whole mess, helping me sort through the repercussions, but until now I've never asked her what she really thinks about the problem that started all this.

"Do you think I need to hear that, too?"

Rose hesitates, and the following sigh doesn't really sound very reassuring.

"Let me be frank, Edward, as things are right now I don't think either of you would accept my opinion, so for the sake of our friendship, no. But if you're curious, I'm happy to impart more wisdom on you."

My beeper goes off and answers the question for me.

"As much as I'm tempted, I need to go. As always, thanks."

"You're welcome! After all your sex life is more entertaining than any sitcom I've watched in the last ten years!"

I laugh and am about to shut my phone off, but hesitate.

"You still there?"

"Sure, why?"

Shoving my tray one-handed into the intended cart, I speed up my steps as I make my way towards the ER.

"One question. Your opinion, I guess your reluctance to tell me means it doesn't just involve Bella and me?"

Rose chuckles, and it's a nasty sound.

"As much as I like her, it sure doesn't involve Alice."

Which, I guess, says it all anyway.

"Thanks, Rose."

"You're welcome. Now don't botch anything just because you've got your panties in a twist."

"Who says I'm wearing any?"

Her laugh is the last thing I hear before I end the call and shove my way through the swing doors into the ER, letting the bustle of people draw my attention away from my own thoughts. I know that her words will haunt me for days anyway, might as well ignore them until the end of my shift.

Chapter 12

Life resumes. Not as I have planned before last weekend, but as usual, the world doesn't stop turning just because I feel like I should really get my head checked.

Any ideas that Bella and I have discussed before are moot, at least for the time being. She's pretty busy throughout the whole week, as am I, and we don't really feel like doing either of the two scenes we've been talking about. I can tell that she thinks I'm too emotionally unstable as it is so she doesn't want to make me feel even more vulnerable by subbing to her, and I honestly prefer to spend what time we have snuggled up rather than exerting ourselves in the playroom. It doesn't happen often that my taste goes for vanilla over kink, but the fact that Bella doesn't seem to mind is balm on my tortured soul. For all her still present insecurity that her more limited interests aren't the best match for mine it's good to see that vice versa she's not just with me because I'm willing to tie her up and spank her soundly. Whoever thinks it's only the subs who have that kind of trouble has never been in love. Because, quite frankly, nothing like strong feelings screws with your head that way.

By Friday morning I have to admit that my reluctance is also based on something else - I've been dreading Bella's birthday party more than I let on, even to myself. Back in summer with her birthday months away and her parents out of reach it has been easy to crack jokes to put that adorable blush onto her cheeks, but now that the day has arrived I'm all kinds of uneasy. I know I have Renee's full approval, but I'm not sure Charlie will be as happy to see his daughter glued to my side. As far as I know he's always been fond of Mike, and for once I'm wishing Jazz and I were on better speaking terms. He practically grew up in the Swan house, and while I know that Charlie might be suspicious about 'my intentions' with his daughter because he knows about the company Jazz keeps, approval of her best friend would certainly have left a more favorable impression than what we can present now.

I feel like I'm worrying too much and repeatedly tell myself to grow a pair, but there is nothing like your gun toting father-in-law to be to scare any man shitless. I know that the only one whose approval I need is Bella herself, but that doesn't really quell my anxiety.

Working through most of the week pays off as I can at least be home by Friday afternoon, although part of me is mourning the chance to stay away.

A very small part of me that I try to ignore, but that gets harder when Bella comes down the steps from the upper floor, wearing pants and one of those wrap around blouses that accent her body in all the right places -

pouting. I know that look on her face too well by now, she's always wearing it when she's trying hard not to be disappointed but can't really help herself.

I feel a little remorseful myself but I know that I'm not quite in the mental place where I have to be if I want to push her around a little. So no corset, no remotely controlled butt plug for her today, although I'm pretty sure that from the way her pants are hugging her ass she's not wearing any panties.

Chuckling to myself I grab her as she sashays by me, wrapping my arms around her waist and tugging

her closer until I can touch my forehead to hers, looking deep into her liquid brown eyes.

"Tease."

She does that irritatingly erotic thing where she catches her lip between her teeth while she's batting her eyelashes at me coyly.

"You're one to say that!"

Before she can go on I brush my lips against her mouth, stopping any further words from spilling forth when I deepen the kiss. A content sigh escapes her that suddenly turns into a high pitched squeal when I reached down and squeeze her ass. Yup, no underwear, and I know she's feeling the bulge in my jeans when I grind my hips against hers. Just because I'm not quite myself enough to keep her physically on edge doesn't mean I have to play fair.

Bella's fingers thread into my hair and she's kissing me hard now, her teeth scraping against my lips while her tongue is rubbing against mine. I try to remember how much time we still have, telling myself that a quickie on the still undefiled kitchen counter should be doable, but Bella's phone chirping to life destroys every hope of that. At least her groan speaks of her sharing my regret, but she's too good a hostess not to answer the phone. So instead of fucking my girl senseless and relieving some of the stress that keeps restless I check that there's enough beer in the fridge.

Two minutes later Bella puts her cell down again but the moment has passed, although her eyes are still dark with lust.

"Promise, once we get rid of all of them again I'll make good on that."

She laughs, needing no explanation for what I mean with that.

"I repeat, tease! Like we'll have any time for ourselves until next week. You know I'm going shopping with Renee tomorrow, and on Sunday we're invited for lunch with Sue and Charlie, I don't think that sneaking off for a blow job in the restrooms will take care of that itch."

"I was actually thinking of something more involved than that," I admit, scratching my head. Bella cocks one brow but then her phone chimes again, and that's that.

Our guests start arriving soon after. Friends, family, co-workers, a few neighbors, and amongst them also dear Jasper. I feel like ignoring him but that would have been childish, so I leave it at a quick nod that he answers likewise. Making sure everyone is provided for with food and drink is enough of a task to keep me busy, so until a while later I don't even have to pretend to keep myself occupied. I relax a little and tell myself to quit jumping at my own shadow. Way to make a good impression when you look guilty all the time.

My mood changes when Bella sends me inside from the terrace to fetch more napkins and I see Charlie and Jazz chatting over the canapés set on the table. I try to remain calm but my stomach is doing flips nevertheless.

The rational part of me is convinced that Jazz will hold his tongue, but the very same rational part never saw anything coming that the conniving ass dumped on me, so I choose not to listen to it. Trying to act as unconcerned as possible, I walk over to the sink and start running hot water to clean the dishes, hoping that no good Samaritan will join me so I can eavesdrop in peace.

For a while Charlie and Jazz are chatting about things of only moderate interest to me – a few curious cases the Forks PD has had over the summer, how Jasper is coping with some recent changes at work, how things are going with Alice. I'm a little taken aback how little I really care about that last topic, as I've always felt like the protective older brother with Alice, but apparently that has changed, too, with all the other things. Slowly I'm running out of dishes and I consider cutting some bread instead, but then Charlie finally asks the question, and I have to control my urge to put down my work so I can concentrate better.

"So, that Edward, is he a good guy for my Bella?"

A glance over my shoulder shows Charlie trying to look pensive, but I can tell that he's bursting to wring an honest answer out of Jazz. Who shrugs and offers one of his signature All American Boy grins, seemingly unconcerned by the question. I feel the urge to threaten him not to say something incredibly stupid, but considering his present company that would be all of suicidal.

"He's okay. Bella certainly thinks he's good for her."

Now I want to punch him, although his light tone sounds inconspicuous enough.

"Only 'okay', eh?" Charlie ventures, looking concerned. "I thought you two were best buds or something."

Jazz has the nonchalance to shrug, not giving away anything.

"We are," he begins, then something passes over his face that I can't quite catch, "or at least we were," he concedes.

"Something afoul?"

I absolutely hate the suspicion in the Chief's tone, but Jazz disbands the rising tension with a quick laugh.

"Nah, I've been acting like a jerk for a while, and Edward's still pissed at me. Which should probably tell you that he's a good guy, not just okay. It's not like he has any reason not to avoid me."

His words stun but calm me, while they seem to have the opposite effect on Charlie.

"Bella never mentioned that he's one to bear a grudge for long. Do you think she's too, you know, biased when it comes to him?"

"Don't worry, if there's one woman on this planet who can make sense of that guy, it's her. Bella knows what she wants, and it looks as if she's getting exactly that. Girl's come a long way since

Forks."

Again Charlie doesn't look too happy with that assessment of his daughter.

"You sure about that? Still feels like yesterday when that boy stood her up before prom, what was his name?"

"Tim Jenkins."

"Jenkins, alright. I just can't see my girl cry, and I don't want any flaky charmer breaking her heart again."

I can tell that Jazz is biting the inside of his cheek when I stealthily glance in his direction, but he shrugs as Charlie keeps on frowning.

"You always thought Mike was a decent, honest guy. Turned out I was right when I told you back then that he's a slimy weasel. Trust me when I tell you that you have no reason to distrust Edward. And if not me, trust Bella. Just look at her, I mean it's been years since she's been so relaxed and happy, I don't think she's in any mood to let you spoil her good time."

He gets a non-committal grunt in answer, and I feel the unease inside of me recede further, only to be replaced by a dubious sense of astonishment.

I know that unlike me or Bella, Jazz is a damn good liar, but he seems sincere in his unprecedented good opinion of me. Apparently I'm not the only one who thinks like that, because if anything, Charlie's interest is piqued.

"I don't remember you ever sticking up for any guy Bella's been dating like that."

"You do remember that he proposed to her? I think it's a lot more serious than dating for either of them. Not that they need my approval or anything.

But you have to agree with me, it's Bella who has to be of a mind about him, not you. And I'm sure that any guy you'd approve of, she wouldn't.

Fathers never look for the same qualities in a man than their daughters."

A grudging nod.

"Still, doesn't really say much about him. I still remember you mentioning him being with you on most of your weekend binges in college."

"As were Bella and Alice. What's your point? I think they grew up to be responsible adults both."

Charlie grunts again.

"You know that's not what I meant."

Jazz obviously does, and for a moment one of those mischievous grins appears on his face that got us both into trouble aplenty more times than I can count. A grin I miss, and now tell myself I hate.

"You're actually asking me of all people if I think that the guy who used to be my unwilling wingman more times than not will be a good and faithful husband for Bella? Come on, Charlie, you know that you can't take anything I say at face value, you know me better than that!"

There goes my calm, instantly replaced by my previous urge to punch him.

Ass!

Strangely, Charlie seems more amused than angry at Jasper's statement.

"Not helping his case much, either."

Jazz laughs, but then clears his throat as he seems to cast around for the right words.

"Look, I won't lie, Edward's not the well-mannered, innocent guy you probably want for Bella. He's been around, a bit, but in the end that means he's seen some of the fish in the sea and knows what he has in Bella. Trust me, your little girl's not that innocent herself, even if you'll always see her with pigtails and skinned knees. She wouldn't want a guy who can't handle her, I think she got over that notion with Mike soon enough. But considering what else is available out there on suitable bachelors, I'd say he's a good catch."

"You trust him not to break my girl's heart then?"

Jasper's pause is sending shivers down my back, but he's quick to catch himself and offers Charlie a good-natured laugh.

"I'm too old to believe in fairy tales. Did you think that things would turn out the way they did when you married Renee? But I'm sure that he'll go to great lengths to try to avoid causing her that kind of grief. He's a good guy.

I trust him."

That admission nearly makes me drop the plate I've been drying for the last two minutes, particularly because he sounds so damn sincere. Charlie looks equally surprised when I glance at him, once again proving that while he's not the most versed talker, the Chief is a good observer.

"Even though you two have a beef with each other?"

This time Jazz's laugh sounds a little edgy.

"That's between Edward and me. But I know that if something grave should happen, I can always turn to him and Bella, and whatever might be between us now, they'd help me. Although I'm sure I've deserved it, neither of them would give up on me. Good enough for you?"

Charlie only offers a grunt while he looks sheepish, then steers the conversation back to baseball before it can get any more awkward. I have to admit, I don't have the same kind of faith in myself that Jazz seems to have, but I can't help feel a little relieved.

Yet as the afternoon turns into evening, the very same words start to haunt me, and Bella's concerned looks tell me I'm doing a bad job trying to appear all happy and normal. It's not like anyone is paying me much attention, with it being her day, as much as she seems to squirm through everyone handing over their gifts.

She is positively speechless when she opens the envelope I hand her, containing my official present - the other one still resting in its box upstairs under the bed - and I get some approving smiles from both her and my parents at the weekend getaway at a remote resort I've organized, date to be chosen by my dearest herself. The fact that I can't do wrong in her eyes only adds to the disturbed feeling that's still gripping me from Jasper's admission, and I'm glad when hours later we're finally alone again, kitchen and living room left in a state of utter warfare.

"May I presume that this gift of yours comes with at least some ulterior motives, Edward?" Bella asks, batting her lashes coyly at me just like she has been doing before the party.

I shrug and never miss a beat in loading the dish washer, but do my best to hide the smirk that's creeping onto my face at the question.

"I hear they have a terrific spa at the resort, too, with the main house."

"Edward Anthony Cullen, if you seriously tell me you chose the 'remote, detached bungalow-style apartments' because of the spa, I'm going to be very disappointed in you!"

I flash her a grin at the air quotes she's doing between throwing used cups into a trash bag, and catch her gaze for a moment.

"I don't know, it seemed kind of useful. Afterwards, you know."

"Afterwards?" she echoes, her smile slowly gaining on intensity.

"Afterwards," I repeat, then continue stacking the plates. I don't hear her when she taps over to me, but certainly don't protest when I feel Bella's arms snake around my body as she hugs me from behind.

"Thank you. A very thoughtful gift."

Pushing the tray into the machine, I start the dish washer before I turn around in her embrace and pull her closer, placing a gentle kiss on her lips.

"You're so very welcome."

Bella laughs, a husky sound that reminds me immediately of the conversation her ringing phone interrupted before all party hell broke loose earlier.

"How long do you think will it take to rub down the counter so we can, you know, christen it?"

A look at the heap of dishes and other clutter makes my heart sink, but only briefly.

"Why don't we leave that for another day and go upstairs instead?"

For a second she looks positively hopeful but then her smile dims, and I'm not quite sure what I've done that makes her lose that radiant glow from one moment to the next.

"Sure, I'll just grab a shower, I really don't want to get the new sheets all sweaty."

Now that's a challenge if I ever heard one but she doesn't look coy, and when I don't respond immediately I see her shoulders sag momentarily.

Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but I've been doing so much second guessing these past days, it's hard to break the routine.

Again Jasper's words echo through my mind. If things were to become dire, he'd trust me to overcome my resentments. Bella has told me the very same thing, over and over again, and it takes my uncanny knack for eavesdropping to make me realize that I don't really believe her, same as I don't believe Jazz. But I want to believe them, deep down I know that to a certain degree it's been my own doubt that has kept me from moving on.

There's nothing I can do about Jazz, but Bella is a wholly different matter.

My sweet, frustrated Bella, who seems to be reconciling herself with another eve spent reading in bed and cuddling until we both fall asleep wrapped around each other.

I might be wrong, but suddenly I feel like I have to disappoint my birthday girl.

She lets out a dismal shriek when I grab her from behind, trapping her arms between our bodies while my hand in her hair wrenches her head back, baring the long line of her throat to me. I hungrily kiss the sensitive skin there before I lick a wet line up to her ear, feeling her shiver as her breath leaves her in a nearly inaudible gasp.

"You have ten minutes to clean yourself, then I want you ready for me in the playroom. Understand?"

She's nodding eagerly before I'm done talking, yanking her roots when I don't let go of her hair, but I get the drift she's doing that deliberately. When she tries to turn her head so that her face comes closer to mine I let go of her, sending her towards the stairs with the gentlest of nudges as my hands trail over her sides and ass. Not even stopping to look at me she scrambles up the steps, proving that I guessed the reason for her moodiness right.

I wait until I hear her close the bathroom door forcefully before I set to the task of cleaning up the kitchen island. I really could have chosen a better day for that plan, but quite frankly, for the way I want to tie her up, the padded bench in the playroom is not the right size – and I've never been one to shy away from improvisations. A few minutes of stacking dishes into the sink and I'm done, and a

quick rub-down later the cool marble slab is ready for my devious plan.

Then I follow Bella upstairs, already unbuttoning my shirt on the way up.

The socks follow, but I keep my jeans on. Not my first choice of playtime clothes, but I don't want to keep her waiting when she's done showering.

While I snatch up all the utensils from the playroom and deposit them on the floor in the kitchen I try to remember what exactly we agreed on when we were planning this scene together. As I don't think anything I want to do will trigger real unease or even fear I decide to wing it, probably not the best idea, but the only one I can come up with on such short notice.

After all, there are just two things I want to achieve. One, for her to burn off most of the frustration causing all those frowns and worried looks she thinks I never notice. Two, for me to finally get it into my head that I am someone who can be trusted. Bella's always been my salvation, somehow it's fitting that I let her prove that to me tonight.

A quick check of my watch tells me that she has two more minutes. After picking up the blindfold I lean against the hallway wall next to the bedroom door, listening to a series of bumps and low curses coming from inside where Bella seems to be fighting with the bath towel. Grinning, I once again marvel at my own luck of ending up with a wonderful woman like her. I really shouldn't need this for myself, this proof of my trustworthiness, she's done nothing to make me doubt myself ever. In fact she's been happy enough letting me escalate things on a regular basis, never hesitating, never using her safeword when things went beyond what she probably expected. It just took me this long to realize how things have been between us all the time.

The sound of partly dry feet on the floor beckons me out of my musing, and before Bella has moved further than two steps out of the room I'm behind her, drawing her to a halt as I pull the blindfold over her head. It's a padded leather blindfold, held in place with elastic strings, not much larger than a sleeping mask but cutting out all the light. Her breath hitches as her world goes dark, but after several seconds she visibly relaxes, letting me take control.

I leave her standing there for several seconds, close enough that she probably feels the heat of my body at her back, but not touching her. Water still glistens on her skin where she's been too hurried or impatient to properly dry herself, causing strands of hair to stick to her shoulder and upper back.

"Right on time, my beautiful Bella," I finally acknowledge her, lightly wrapping my hands around her upper arms. She doesn't respond but I feel her ease into my grip, her skin slightly cooler than mine.

"Do you still remember what we were talking about a while ago?"

She cocks her head, then nods. "The sensory deprivation scene, Sir?"

"Exactly that," I agree, then plant the lightest of kisses on her bare shoulder, only to be rewarded with another shudder.

"I need you to trust me tonight," I venture on, underscoring my words with a second kiss just next to

the first one. "I need you not to second-guess me.

You submit to me, without question." Another kiss, this one closer to her neck. "I'm in control, and I can do whatever I want with you."

By the end of my little speech her whole body seems to vibrate, and she has to swallow twice before she can bring out a husky, "Yes, Sir," that makes my cock twitch.

"Any questions?"

"No, Sir."

I'm glad she doesn't hesitate, but she still stiffens when I let go of her and push the blue plastic ball of the gag into her mouth. Bella's hands twist as if she wants to reach up to her face, but then she relaxes again, not protesting when I fix the straps behind her head. I make sure that the leather doesn't bite into the skin of her cheek but sits snugly enough that she cannot easily press the ball out between her teeth. A light frown has taken residence on her forehead, but with the blindfold in place, I can't really tell if she's annoyed or just slightly apprehensive.

Once I'm done I step behind her again and take hold of her arms, then push her into motion in front of me. I let her take slow but sure steps, stopping when we reach the top of the stairs. Only when I start leading her down into the living room does she stiffen a bit, but I think it's excitement now rather than fear. Downstairs I let go of her and she stops, and only resumes walking after I slide my fingers against hers and take her hand to tug her along into the kitchen part of the room.

A delightfully huffy squeal leaves her when I pick her up and set her down on the island, but she doesn't even fidget and remains sitting there with her back straight and her tits delightfully right in front of my face. A multitude of things run through my mind that I would love to do to her now, but I'm simply not in the mood for a quick fuck.

Instead I bend down and pick something up from the floor, painting a new frown on her forehead when I place the fingers of her right hand around the rubber ball. Closing my fist further around hers I show her how much to squeeze the toy, until it emits a squeaking noise.

"If you feel like anything is amiss, you need to tell me. Speaking obvious won't work, and I intend to make you grunt and moan so much that I can't really rely on that for a signal. But the second you squeeze the ball I will stop what I do and check on you. Understood?"

Bella nods and compresses her fist, making the toy squeak loudly. Even with the gag I can see the grin on her face, and quickly punish her mirth by leaning in and biting the sweet spot on the side of her neck. I get rewarded with a low moan that goes straight to my cock and decide that I definitely want to hear this sound many times more until I'm done with her tonight.

Her playful mood evens out into relaxed passiveness when I push her down onto the cool marble slab, then push her around until I have her exactly the way I want her – her ass flush with the long side of the island, legs spread and bent right now, and her arms extended. I even fetch one of the pillows

from the couch to put under her head – tonight I want her calm and relaxed, something I normally don't go for when I tie her up.

The only flaw in her position is that she can still move, obviously, but that is fixed quickly with a few yards of soft, black rope. I don't think the handles of the drawers and the rail to put the dishtowels up for drying were meant for this exact purpose, but they work really well for me. It only takes me a few minutes to restrain her ankles and wrists to the corners of the island, and add a few more bonds to her arms and legs above and below her joints to make sure that she's properly immobilized.

Once I'm done I step back and admire my work, feeling my cock grow hard in my jeans. The way she's tied down is a delicious compromise between practicality and eye candy, the contrast of the black ropes over her ivory skin atop the charcoal marble nearly a piece of art. Her slightly bent legs beckon to be touched but I hold myself back, instead letting the visual impact do its own thing to my body. I know it's about the same for her, only with the physical feedback from the contrasting signals her skin picks up from the hard, unyielding stone she's lying on and the multitude of pressure points the ropes paint all over her limbs. The fact that she can't see anything and the gag only adds to her feeling of helplessness very likely amplifies the experience tenfold.

After a while she flexes her free hand and tries to test the bonds, but there is no slack to the ropes, even though they hold her in a position that leaves next to no strain on her muscles. With her ankles and wrists slightly twisted there's also no chance for leverage for her shoulders or hips, and when she realizes that she huffs with slight annoyance. She's completely at my mercy, and I'm going to make sure that she'll love every second of it.

Unwilling to wait any longer I step up to the island between her spread legs and lean over her, careful not to touch her. My breath wafting over her body sends shivers through her, and she eagerly turns her face to where she presumes mine to be.

"I can do anything I want to do to you," I repeat my earlier words, speaking slow and in a low tone that I know she finds sexy. "I can touch you anywhere I want," I continue, while I slowly trace the curve of her collarbone with my index finger. "Here, or here," my finger trails down the valley between her breasts, deviating for a moment so I can squeeze her left tit softly. I feel her arch into my palm, or try to, but within a moment the ropes are all taught and she has to accept defeat when I let go of her again. My finger continues its journey from her breastbone down the soft skin of her stomach, but I stop short of her pussy, instead trailing a line over her hip and to the ropes that bind her left leg. "Or here."

Bella mewls plaintively and I can see the muscles in her thighs flex as she tries to move her hips, but as with her arms there is not enough give for more than a light jerk towards me. I grin, then lean down and blow air over her pussy lips, making her squeal into the gag.

"You see," I continue as I straighten again until my face is right above hers,

"I can take my time exploring your body. Minutes, even hours, and there's nothing you can do about it." While I speak I let my palms roam over her ribs but stay shy of her breasts, close enough to hint but far enough away to tease her. "Of course I could just grab you and fuck you hard," - that while I

briefly grind my jeans covered cock against her pussy until she moans loudly, before I pull away - "but where's the fun in that? No, tonight I'll take it real slow."

It's good that she can't see my face because the frown on her forehead makes me grin, and I have to work hard to keep that out of my voice. I'm pretty sure that she has been hoping for some quick, passionate sex, but I'm in no mood to oblige the first part of that wish. The second, we'll see about.

Done with talking, I bend my head down and start to kiss and lick her upper body, spending minutes teasing her neck and breasts until more of those delicious moans escape her. I pay attention that all of my touches are soft and gentle, even when I bring my hands up to massage her tits. I want her to really feel every single touch, adding to the need and lust inside of her until she's ready to burst although I haven't really done anything especially exciting yet. And my plan works, judging by the noises she makes and how she's trying but failing to writhe in her bonds.

Then I make my way lower down her body but I stray a lot, brushing kisses all over her torso while my fingers draw idle lines on the soft skin of her inner thighs. Her moans become louder and deeper, and when I reach her pussy, she's already wet and more than willing.

A sigh escapes her when I plant a few kisses onto her slightly puffy lips but that's all I intend to do, and when she feels me step away her whole body tenses as she grunts out in frustration. This time I can't hold back and chuckle, causing another frown to mar her forehead.

"My pretty, pretty Bella, all excited and ready for me, only too bad that I don't intend to take any advantage of you."

She grunts again, this time even louder, and for a moment I think about slapping her to bring her back in line. But as much as I revel in the feeling of being the one in complete control, I don't really care about her being submissive tonight. I even want her to show her frustration, I want her angry and helpless, because for whatever reason that pushes my buttons more than anything else at the moment.

I leave her like that for another minute or two before I walk around the island to where her head is about the only thing she can move. She hears my steps and tries to keep track of them, and her frown deepens when I stop directly behind and above her but neither speak nor touch her. Her teeth bite a little into the ball of the gag as she probably tries to gnash them, and I idly wipe some escaped drool from her cheek. Ball gags are always messy that way, another reason why I love them so much.

"Do you want me to continue?" I ask her teasingly, and she grunts angrily before she visibly reins herself in and nods. I even kiss her upper arm between the ropes a few times but then stop again, waiting for her reaction.

She's clearly fighting the urge to try to demand that I go on, but months of being in the role of a rather meek submissive make it hard for her. I know I'm a bad, bad man for enjoying her internal struggle so much, but my cock twitches again when a partially muffled "Please?" leaves her lips.

"Please what?"

I know she can answer me if she really wants to, but she opts to leave it at a plaintive moan, and my dick definitely agrees that that's better than a jumbled sentence. Smiling I kiss her arm again, then move to the other one before I nibble on her earlobe.

"Please touch you again?"

She nods, then moans once more when I don't continue.

"Please make you writhe with need?"

This time she moans already as she nods, and I reward her with a messy kiss and keep sucking on her neck until she moans once more.

"Please make you come?"

She definitely likes that idea and agrees with a new kind of grunted moan, lower and more guttural than I'm used from her. My cock definitely approves.

"I can do that," I go on, nudging the slowly darkening hickey I've just produced with my nose. "But I want a reward for my efforts from you, too."

She nods again, probably excepting me to tell her to suck me off or something, but that would have been too easy. I know that even with Bella being more open about her sexuality than before, she's still somewhat self-conscious at times, and I've been itching for a while to tear those defenses down, just never had the right opportunity. Until now.

"I have every intention of making you come over and over again, but in turn I want to hear you enjoy it."

A new frown appears, this one not angry but plain surprised. Still grinning, I elaborate.

"I can't really see your face with the blindfold, and the gag is making it not much easier to judge your reaction. So I want you to moan and groan, grunt and mewl in pleasure so I know that what I'm doing is the right thing."

I shouldn't be surprised that my words make her blush but of course they do, even down her cleavage to her breasts. I figure she hasn't been realizing how vocal she's been until now, and the fact that she still feels shame about it really doesn't sit well with me. She's quick to nod, though, desperation and her sense of duty to oblige my order overruling her reservations, but that simply won't do any longer.

"And I don't mean only to indulge my wish. I want you to go into yourself and feel the need I'm invoking inside of you. And when there's no other way to let it out – and trust me, I won't just let you come because you need to –

I want you to voice that need, without hesitation."

I kiss her neck one last time, then move up to her cheek, brush my lips against the corner of her mouth

right next to the gag.

"I love your moans, and you have no idea what they're doing to me. And tonight I want to really hear you, or else I'll keep toying with you until I'm tired enough to go to bed and untie you without granting you your much needed satisfaction. Your choice entirely."

A last kiss and I step away once more, leaving her on her own for a few minutes while I watch her take one slow breath after another. I can nearly see the thoughts behind her beautiful forehead run wild, but really, it has to be her decision, I've done all the pushing I can.

As cool and blasé as I might be acting, seeing her so frustrated is hard for me. I really want to make her come, and I definitely want to fuck her, a lot, but my ego is for once stronger than my own horniness. I'm still grateful when she finally lets her head fall to the side in a comic acceptance of defeat, offering me another of those moaned pleas that I don't hesitate to answer this time.

I draw a delighted laugh from her when she feels my fingers rub up and down her pussy lips before I spread them, and laughter turns to surprisingly loud moan the moment my tongue licks over her clit. I do it again as does she, and when my lips close around her clit and I suck hard, she nearly screams into the gag. She's blushing hard as she does it, and when I keep on licking the cry turns into a breathy laugh again that still holds a note of shame, but also sounds delightfully carefree.

My attempt to draw more of those laughs and moans from her is a little too successful, and before long I feel her body start to tense with her impending climax. I can't have that yet so I stop, only to be rewarded with a clearly annoyed grunt. At least that hurdle is gone, I realize, and continue my ministrations, if at a much slower pace. It takes some nibbling on her puffy labia and light squeezing of her breasts to pacify her again, and I at least enjoy myself greatly as I keep her just shy of reaching her orgasm for minutes. She's still a little hesitant with her vocalization, but as time progresses, that fades to the point where she doesn't seem to mind much anymore whether she's sounding like a wanton slut or not. At least her moans are real and not the fake ones of an overtly enthusiastic porn star, something I really appreciate.

After a while my jaw is aching from pleasing her with my mouth, and I decide that it's time for my last bout of evilness for the day. I know she's been as hesitant about this as the gag, but as that seems to be working out just fine, I think I can be a little daring. She'd probably be disappointed if I wasn't.

This time she sounds less frustrated and more tired when I step away from her, her pants loud in the otherwise silent kitchen as I watch her calm down. Bella even moans softly when she feels my hand back up at her breast, stroking the sweaty skin lovingly for a moment. Yet her moan quickly changes into a grunt when the clothespin snaps shut around her nipple, amplified when I do the same on her other breast. Then she's silent once more, and I reach down to rub her clit slowly to take away the sting caused by the plastic now biting into her nipples.

I keep rubbing her until I see her relax again, then I add more clothespins to her tits until the soft flesh is haphazardly obstructed with brightly colored plastic. The clothespins are by far not the nastiest I keep in my playroom, but I know that they can develop quite the pinch if left on long enough. One way to make them less painful is always to use them on an already excited victim and keep providing more

pleasure, and for that sake I reach for the vibrator I've brought along with the rope.

Her first moan when she feels the vibrating dildo pressed against her clit and slid between her pussy lips is still soft, but before long she's trying to grind against it just as much as she did with my face before. I toy a little with her, pushing the vibrator against the entrance of her pussy but never really inside her, causing her to mewl and plead with me, but to no avail. I only stop when I have her on the brink of coming again, and this time she's clearly, and very loudly displeased with me. I only grin and reach for another handful of clothespins.

A whine leaves her when I put the first clothespin onto her outer pussy lip, watching the slick, swollen flesh pinched by the plastic teeth. I add another one to her other lip, just opposite the first one, then wait if she's showing any signs of real pain, but Bella stays silent and doesn't squeeze her ball.

Her brows are knit but I know that look on her face well enough, she's not quite sure if it's pain or pleasure that's at the front of her mind, and that's good enough for me. Quickly adding six more clothespins, three on each side, I complete my plan, and immediately return to rubbing her clit with my thumb.

This time it takes longer for her to relax, and I know that by now the clothespins on her breasts, particularly her nipples, must cause a dull, throbbing sensation, bordering on light pain. Trying to be as gentle as possible I spread the neat rows of clothespins on her labia with my thumb and forefinger, then tease her clit first with my tongue, then the vibrator again. She clearly likes that, more and louder moans coming from behind the gag, and after I'm sure she's well on her way to coming again – I stop.

What can I say, I'm a bastard.

Bella rears her head up and cries in frustration, and I have to bite my lip hard not to laugh. Only this time she doesn't leave it at that, but a whole string of grunts and muffled expletives follows, making the moment even more delightful for me. As much as I love fucking her, this is even more rewarding, as is the fact that she can do absolutely nothing to gain the satisfaction she so craves.

While I would love to keep this up, I know that my time window for making it right in the end will be closing soon, so I hurry on while she's still too agitated to really listen to what's going on. My jeans and boxers are discarded easily enough, and the cool air feels great on my straining hard cock. I hesitate for a moment, but she's so wet that I know that she can take just a little more pain before it tips the balance the wrong way, and reach for the duct tape.

Bella's tantrum is cut short when she hears the telltale sound of the tape tearing, and she cocks her head in wonder. Then she whimpers again when I slowly push the four clothespins on the left side of her pussy towards her thigh, fixing them to stay in place with the tape, following up with the same procedure on her other leg. The strain and bite of the clothespins gets heightened by that, but I need them out of the way – and she doesn't know yet how much she'll feel that in a minute or two.

Finally done with toying with her I crouch down and attack her clit with my lips and tongue while I push two fingers inside her at the same time. If she could she would be arching her back now, but

even so her needy cry tells me that she definitely enjoys the attention. It only takes a few licks and she's trembling, not quite ready to come again but close.

Straightening up I grab my cock as I step up to the island and run the head up and down between her spread and clamped pussy lips, before I slowly push into her while I keep rubbing her clit with my thumb. I feel her cunt contracting around me although she's not coming yet, but instead fighting the unexpected new pain radiating from the lower clothespins. But she's taking it well, only sobs once before the sound turns into a satisfied moan when she feels me fully sheathed inside her. It's fucking hard not to come right there for me as there's a lot of tension in her pussy, and seeing her give in to the pain and actually enjoy it always rattles my restraints.

I withdraw as slowly as I've entered her, about the only thing I can do to keep myself from coming, and she answers with a breathy moan that grows louder when I push back in. My cock is throbbing with the exertion of not taking her fast and hard, but I force myself to keep it slow, increasing the rhythm and depth of my thrusts steadily but at a leisurely pace. Before long I switch my thumb for the vibrator, and Bella's cries become louder as the steady buzz on her clit is driving her wild.

She is so beautiful underneath me, crying and moaning as her plastic covered tits sway in time with my thrusts. One after the other I pick off the clothespins until only those on her nipples and pussy lips remain, the angry red marks quickly fading as I know the inflicted discomfort must me. I don't know if she even realizes what's going on, her head dug deep into the pillow and all kinds of needy sounds coming from her.

That changes when I take off the clothespin from her right nipple, a gasp of pain sounding between two moans. Bending over her I catch the hurting nipple with my lips and tease it with my tongue, then suck on it gently. She answers with an approving keen and I keep it up until I'm sure the worst sting is gone, then repeat the same on the other side. She nearly comes with this spike of pain, and once I'm done I turn the vibrator on high.

This finally does the trick, and Bella comes undone with a silent scream, her mouth open around the gag before she bites into it hard. First she goes rigid and I feel her pussy clamp down on my cock, before she dissolves in convulsive shivers all over. I quickly remove the vibrator but keep fucking her, drawing out her pleasure for what is probably close to two minutes. I get a little lost in her wonderful gasps and pants, and only when she's done do I realize that I haven't come with her.

I nevertheless feel the weariness in my muscles and the temptation to collapse on her is strong, but I force my head to clear and pull away, the wet sound of my cock leaving her pussy oddly comical. Three of the clothespins have come detached from her pussy and I slowly take the others off, making her whimper with the pain of the blood rushing back, but it can't be too bad as she doesn't even raise her head.

Once the duct tape is gone I kneel down before her and kiss her tormented pussy lips, gently massaging them with my fingers. When I'm sure she has come down from her orgasm I begin tonguing her clit again while I keep stroking and rubbing her aching pussy, getting rewarded with soft, thoroughly pleased sighs.

Undoing her bonds is a lot faster than tying her up, and before long I can gather my completely spent Bella in my arms, only removing the gag and blindfold after I've hugged her against my chest. Even the dimmed light makes her blink and she grimaces and works her jaw for the better part of a minute, ignoring my silent amusement stoically. I meanwhile stroke her back and kiss her shoulder, and I'm just incredibly happy to hold her.

"That was

damnit, you're such a mean bastard!" are the first coherent words she finally mumbles into my chest, making me laugh almost instantly.

"Yes, I am," I agree good-naturedly, grinning even wider when she thumps my thigh in vexation.

"Seriously! I lost my count, but you had me so close like five times, and always you stopped! By the end I'd nearly given up hope that you would let me come at all!"

I can't help it, I have to keep on grinning, my ego's just been stroked too much to let me tune it down.

"Now that would be plain evil. I told you I would let you come if you'd just put enough effort into showing me that you were enjoying yourself."

"Enjoying myself, my ass," she grumbles into my chest, then hugs me closer as she rearranges herself until she's straddling me. Bella's trying to regard me sternly as she finally faces me, but she's still flushed from coming so hard, and generally looking like the cat who just finished licking up the cream. Even though she tries to fight it, her lips curve into a smile when our gazes meet, and I pull her closer for a long, gentle kiss that she joins readily.

"I love you," I murmur against her lips before I gather her even closer while continuing to ravish her mouth. My voice is so laden with emotion that I know she must be wondering what's going on, but her tongue is eager against mine, as are her fingers combing through my sweat-slicked hair.

She's rocking against me unconsciously, and for a moment I wish I could will my hard-on away that's intruding on this tender moment, but then her hand is there, and the next moment she is guiding me inside of her, a warm and wet welcome. I feel her shake with silent laughter when I emit a low groan, before she leans back onto the marble and draws me on top of her.

"As much as I'd love to ride you into oblivion for what you just did to me, I have to let you take over again, my thighs are just too knotted up from that constant tensing, and then more tensing when I still can't come, and then -"

I cut off her chuckled diatribe with a hungry kiss, and grabbing her ass to tilt her pelvis the right way, make do happily with her instruction. I come fast once I feel her sharp nails dig into my back, and Bella happily hugs me hard once I'm spent, so close that I should be feeling her heartbeat through her skin.

Once I regain my strength I slide off the kitchen island, drawing her along with me, and when she still doesn't let go I pull her legs up around my hips and carry her up into the bedroom this way, the heavy

mood from earlier quickly dispensing between my weary stumbling and her laughing at it. I try to get back at her for that in an attempt to tickle her while I wash her body, but she's a lot faster to recuperate than I am, and in the end it's me who is pinned against the tile floor, begging breathlessly for mercy while she's kneeling over me. Satisfied with having had her revenge Bella finally lets me get up, and before long we both tumble into our bed, too lazy to clean up the mess downstairs.

I find myself smiling at her contently as she draws the blankets up around us, but instead of snuggling into my body so I can spoon her, she mirrors my position, regarding me with those expressive, brown eyes.

"You're happy," she finally observes, sounding just the same herself.

"I am," I agree. "Why shouldn't I be, I have a wonderful woman at my side who lets me do all kind of perverted and devious things to her and loves me for just being who I am."

Her smile brightens and she shimmies closer, a gentle hand cradling my cheek. I briefly turn my face into her caress and kiss her palm, before I look into her eyes again.

"I'm glad you finally realized that."

Her words make me pause for a moment, then I offer her a sheepish smile.

"Am I that obvious?"

Bella shakes her head and laughs, then comes even closer until she straddles me again, but this time only to lie down on my chest and prop her chin up on her hands there so she can stare me right in the face from up close.

"Not really. For a long time you've been a huge mystery to me that only got darker and larger after that one faithful Sunday afternoon when I did the scariest thing in my life and came over to your house in just a shirt, skirt, and shoes. But the more I know the real you, the easier it's getting to see through all the layers of pretense and defensive mechanisms, and once you let me in, you're not really that much of a mystery anymore."

"Damn, and there I thought I did such a good job at deceiving you," I joke, but her light smile makes me go serious instantly again. "Thank you. For putting up with me through all this. And still loving me."

Her kiss is soft and gentle, and now it's her eyes that are brimming over with emotion.

"You know that I will always love you, Edward. I love you because you are you, and not someone else. You don't need to be anybody else, just you. I only want the real you."

My throat is suddenly tight and I feel the lump in my chest trying to overwhelm me, so I quickly kiss her deeply until the pain goes away, and I can breathe again. Her gentle touches still speak of her knowing exactly how close to crying I've just been, but she lets me get away with it uncommented.

"I just wonder what made you finally realize that. I mean our talk last weekend has been important, I know that, but I somehow don't think it was that much of a revelation for you as it for me."

I'm happy when she lets me tug her against my side so she doesn't keep staring right into my face, although I don't really have anything to hide; the scrutiny just makes me a little leery.

"I don't really know," I start, then bite my lip because I do know, and should know better than lie to Bella now. So I sigh, and spill my guts.

"I happened to listen in to a conversation between Jazz and Charlie today -

"

"You mean you eavesdropped," she chides me softly, grinning.

A dramatic sigh, but I nod.

"Yes, I eavesdropped on them, but only with the best of intentions. Which was, mostly, to get a head start should Jazz divulge any details that might send you dad running for his shotgun to end my miserable existence."

Her laughter tickles the side of my neck, and I have to admit, it's quite infectious.

"He'd never do something like that."

"Oh, I'm sure Charlie would do worse than just shoot me if he knew what we've just done in the kitchen."

Bella chuckles and hides her face in my arm pit for a moment before she goes on.

"No, I meant Jazz. It's simple self-preservation that he keeps his trap shut, as he's mired in this nearly as much as we are. Maybe even more when it comes to the 'Die, scum, you broke my little girl's heart!' thing. After all, you are too nice a guy to pull such a stunt on your own."

"Too nice, eh?" I ask flatly, but her smile stays as warm as before.

"Edward, whatever you did, and for what insane reasons or lack thereof, I know pretty well who's responsible for what happened. I know that you weren't actively trying to go behind my back, I know that you'd never deceive me. Your fault was to trust your closest friend, and quite frankly, if I hadn't been so upset and insecure I would have reacted a whole lot differently. And I'm ashamed that it took our fight last week to make me realize that I've let you take too much blame for too long. As I said, you're a good guy, maybe too good for this world sometimes."

I probably should be happy about her words, but they only make me angry.

"Wait, now you're switching from blindly defending him to even more blindly defending me?"

"I'm not, I just wanted to -"

I interrupt her surprised gasp quickly before she can elaborate.

"Don't. Just, don't. I know what I did, and trust me when I tell you that I'm so not proud of my actions. But it doesn't help anyone to twist the truth long enough until it's a lie all over again. I cheated on you, and even if it was just a kiss and some groping and I'm sure it wouldn't have been more, I still shouldn't have done any of those things. And you forgave me, because you're a better person than I am, and you love me, and you know how much I love you, and we both agreed to move on, consider it as a thing of the past and a warning for me to better not fuck it up again, because this is my second chance, and the only one I ever want and will ever need.

Nothing more."

My words stun her, maybe even hurt her, but I need to stress my point, even if I end up offending her.

"Edward, that's not what I meant. I agree with you, and I'm glad we both see it the same way. What I wanted to say, and what I would have said if you would let me speak, is that just because the trust you put in someone once was betrayed while you inevitably did the same to me, doesn't mean that you can't trust anyone anymore, or can't be trusted in turn. Can we agree on that, too?"

Her somewhat acidic tone makes my affirmative answer more of a grunt than a "yes", and she sharply nods in acknowledgement.

"Very well. So can I in turn presume that your attempt at stealthiness this afternoon somehow kindled the spark of that realization that you then had to follow up on by driving me insane on your latest, and let me assure you very appreciated, control trip?"

Bella's tone stays as clipped as before but she has a hard time trying not to grin, and my repeated grunt has lost most of its grumpiness also.

"Awesome! Now that that's out of the way, may I presume that we're one step closer in mending all the hurts and ouchies that plague your mystery of a soul?"

"I guess we are," I concede, then draw her down to me and kiss her, thanking her that way while she keeps laughing whenever I let her come up for air.

"And," she pants as she rears back, grinning down at me. "May I presume that you know that I had a great time following your request of being more vocal?" she moans out the word while her eyes sparkle with mirth. I nod, answering her smile with one of my own.

"And may I presume that those nasty contraptions that hide their true purpose by pretending to be clothespins will make a repeat appearance some time in the future?"

"Only if you ask me very nicely to use them again."

Her radiant smile is answer enough, although the following chuckle bodes well, too.

"You know, I was really uneasy about them when you talked me into agreeing to let you use them. I even kind of expected you to hold me to that promise the moment you blindfolded me today. And when you had them on my pussy lips and pushed into me, I very much hated you, for a second or two. But then that distinction between pain and pleasure became really blurred, and I kind of stopped caring which of both was the predominant sensation, and I guess the fact that I came for like forever tells you just how much I enjoyed them in the end. Although you kissing the pain away afterwards was really very sweet, and felt so incredible that I think I'd want to try that again even if I hadn't liked the pinch at all."

Smiling, I kiss her nose. "You're so very welcome, my love."

"I was a little surprised that you did that. With the nipple clamps before I always had the feeling that you were just sucking on them afterwards to draw out my discomfort a little longer, but today you kept going quite a while beyond that, letting me enjoy the sensation fully."

Her admission is definitely news to me, and for a moment I feel a little chagrin. I should probably have asked her before just how she feels about the clamps and my attempts to soothe her aching nipples afterwards, but I kind of always assumed that her arching her back and moaning loudly was a good thing only. Not that it's a huge deal, and I'm sure she would have spoken up if she'd been really uncomfortable, but it's a good reminder for me not to take anything for granted.

Following the impulse to make my own shortcoming up to her I reach for her breast and gently stroke my thumb over her nipple twice. Bella's lids flutter closed and a sigh escapes her, enticing me to lean down and capture her other nipple with my lips, letting my tongue do the same as my finger.

"Yes, like that," she moans, and I stop only for a second to glance up at her in surprise before I go on, slightly intensifying my sucking.

"Why are you looking at me so strangely?"

Giving both of her nipples a last, wet kiss I lie down again, my face right next to hers.

"Just a little surprised to hear you say something like that."

Of course that makes her blush but she doesn't look away, although she catches her lip between her teeth in a somewhat defiant way.

"You said you wanted me to speak up more, so here you are, this is me being more vocal! Any objections?"

"None at all. I'm sure I'll get used to it soon enough."

She grins as I draw her closer for a kiss. "Good boy."

That makes me stop with my mouth inches from hers, and I playfully nip at her chin instead of kissing her. "Someone's getting cocky, eh?"

Her throaty laugh is neither admission nor negation, and all the more answer for that.

"Don't you remember the other scene we've been talking about? The one where you get to be begging me for release on your knees while I have my revenge on you for all the times you kept me hanging?"

Nibbling at her chin again I kiss a quick line up to her ear, delighting in the way her breath hitches although she tries to stay all calm and collected.

"No, I haven't forgotten, and you have no idea just how much I look forward to that."

Bella laughs and kisses me, her teeth in turn nibbling on my lower lip, before she sighs contently and closes her eyes, still smiling. I watch her for a moment before my own lids droop shut, and I'm nearly asleep when she speaks up again.

"Just what did Jazz or Charlie say to make you change your mind like that?"

I'm too tired to open my eyes again, but the answer's easy enough to give.

"Jazz said that for whatever reason we're not on the best of terms right now, he knows that if he's ever in need of a real friend, he knows he can come to me and trusts me to help him."

I can feel her stiffen beside me so I pry my eyes open, finding her unwavering gaze studying me as if she's trying to read the truth behind that statement from my face.

"And is that the case?"

I let my breath escape me noisily while I try to find the right words.

"Nothing has changed from what I told you last week, as far as being friends with him, I'll be very glad to keep any interaction to a minimum. If I never have to talk to him I won't be heartbroken. But if you want to remain friends with him, and if he shows up on our doorstep needing us, of course I'll help him. Not for his sake, but for yours, and a little for my own, too."

Her eyes are still so full of questions that I sigh and go on.

"Bella, I've spent half of my life wondering what is wrong with me. And ever since I fucked up, that's turned into something very close to real self loathing. But I don't want this to break me, to eat me up and keep hurting you this way, and I know it will if I don't ease up on myself. And for whatever reason, hearing him say to Charlie that when it comes to the worst, he still trusts me, I don't know, that made something inside me click.

I know it should have been your love and your forgiveness that makes me feel worthy in your eyes, but we both know that when it comes to the subject of me, you're utterly biased. But I don't think that there's anyone out there who hates me as much as Jazz does, and when he can move on, well, so should I, don't you think?"

She nods slowly, then kisses me again before she settles back down onto my shoulder.

"Thank you for telling me. And yes, you should."

I'm weirdly glad that I told her, even a little proud, but as I drift off to sleep I realize that I probably told her a few things she really didn't have to know.

Anyone but her would probably have ignored them, but she's not anyone, and I know that I just dug the foundation for our next talk some day in the future. I don't really know if I should be apprehensive of that, or happy. I guess that's a part of loving someone, too.

Chapter 13

There is nothing better in the world than waking up next to a beautiful woman.

Except maybe finding her fingers wrapped tightly around my cock while her tongue hungrily explores my mouth. No way this can get any better - until I open my eyes and see Bella grin down at me with a look on her face that can only be described as nasty. I love having her kneel at my feet, a picture of elegant submissiveness, but seeing her take control, well, that's a huge turn-on in itself, particularly as she doesn't show that side of her very often.

And of all days I didn't expect her to get playful *now*.

It's Sunday morning, two days after Bella's birthday party. Yesterday, after a marathon shopping trip with Renee, she has been too tired for anything except cuddling once I got home from the hospital, but today her energy seems replenished.

I wonder for a moment if this is her way of taking my mind off having lunch with Charlie later today, but then she squeezed my cock hard to get my attention, and all thoughts about her father leave my mind.

"Finally awake?" she teases me, but before I can reply she muffles my answer with another passionate kiss. I nibble on her jaw even after she turns her head away, but she moves farther back before my lips can reach her neck. Her eyes are sparkling with lust and mischief, and when she whispers into my ear, her voice is low and throaty.

"You have twenty minutes to clean yourself, then I expect you kneeling in the playroom, naked. And you will call me Mistress, as for the next few hours that's what I am, your Mistress."

I feel myself nod while I try to swallow around the lump in my throat, but before I can answer she's off the bed and out of the room, leaving a trail of her clean scent with a note of perfume. I'm still not really awake, contrary to my cock, but once her words register fully I scrub my eyes to clear my head, and glance at the alarm clock. It's 8:10, about an hour before what Bella usually regards as acceptable wake-up time on weekends. She really must be quite excited about this or else she wouldn't have gotten up so early. And who am I to protest?

In the bathroom I realize two things - Bella already got through her morning routine, as the utensils in the trash and the damp towel on the rack tell me -

and twenty minutes aren't really a lot of time. I also realize that we never got to actually talk about the scene, but from her behavior I guess that she has a plan, and knowing Bella that probably means she got herself some clues from Beth, even though I remember that she seemed reluctant to do that again before. I don't know why I'm even surprised - after all it was my

'fault' that she has been over at Beth's a lot over the last weeks, getting her birthday presents - the two corsets - fit, and it's unlike either one of them not to talk about anything kinky sooner or later.

While I mull this over in my mind I quickly go through what used to be my prep routine long enough to still stick to a point - shave, brush teeth, clean what needs to be cleaned for what I hope she'll do to me - not exactly in that order, with a quick, cold shower squeezed in between that does nothing to diminish my erection. With barely a minute to spare I hurry into the playroom across the hall and kneel down on the lonely cushion sitting in the middle of the otherwise empty floor, a little out of breath and with my pulse elevated.

As she's used from me - probably a little too used as I note to myself - Bella leaves me there to stew and wait for several minutes, alone with my racing thoughts and excitement. I force myself to take deep breaths as I lace my fingers behind my head and shuffle around on my knees until my thighs are sufficiently spread - and it's amazing how easily I slip into a submissive mindset even though I'm absolutely not used to see Bella as dominant over me. I also don't think I can do this often, but for today there's not a single fiber in me that feels like protesting against handing the proverbial leash over to her.

The telltale click of high heels makes me want to look up but I force my eyes to remain trained on the floor in front of me, but can't help tense up a bit in an effort to kneel straighter. Slowly she walks up to my back, then takes a tour around me, her stocking clad feet in the unfamiliarly high heeled shoes the only thing I see of Bella. After another slow round she stops right in front of me, and taps my shoulder once with a crop she must have brought in with her as I'm sure she didn't get near the toy rack on her way in.

A nudge on my chin makes me raise my head, and I swallow hard as my eyes drink her in. Bella looks sublime, and definitely in charge as she stands looming over me, a devious smile playing around the corners of her mouth. The stockings are stay-ups, the dark lace an enticing contrast to her creamy skin. She's also wearing a matching lace thong, from what I can see in the reflection in the mirrored walls from the corner of my eye, and a black leather corset, moderately laced up in the back, as tightly as I figure she could manage by herself and retain enough flexibility to move unhindered.

So much to Beth's claim that the second part of my birthday present for Bella will take another week or so to be finished. Not that I have much mental capacity left to complain inside my head right now. Not that I feel like complaining at all.

Bella gives me ample time to drink her in with my eyes, amusement lighting up her face while she flexes the crop in her hands. My cock is nearly uncomfortably hard by now, and I swallow thickly once more when she leans down towards me, her leather encased breasts right in front of my face, while she lets the tip of the crop slide over my cock.

"Edward," she purrs, and I can see that she loves being the one to use actual names in here for once.

"Mistress," I try to answer her in an even voice but the single word comes out rather pressed, which only furthers her glee.

"I see you're a good boy, happy to see your Mistress and ready to have her do with you whatever she pleases?"

She underlines her words by idly tapping the small paddle at the end of the crop repeatedly against my cock, barely hard enough to qualify as more than a caress. It's still more than enough to drive me wild. A violent shiver runs through me as I force myself to stay completely still, my eyes boring into hers.

"Yes, Mistress." I add a silent 'please' in my thoughts, and I'm sure she can read it from the probably besotted look on my face.

She acknowledges my answer with a curt nod and a smile, then straightens before she struts over to the supply cabinet. I lower my head again but can't keep myself from watching her barely covered ass sway below where the corset is forcing her already great curves into perfect shape. Normally I'd want to bend her over and swat her butt thoroughly, but today I'm entirely too happy where I am, kneeling, waiting for her to return.

Which she does a minute later, where she drops a full set of black leather cuffs right in front of me.

"Put those on. I don't see why I should stoop so low and get on my knees for you," she jibes, still smiling. I hurry to obey, buckling the padded cuffs around my ankles and wrists. I'm a little surprised to realize that they are indeed my old leather cuffs that I store, mostly for sentimental value, in a box under the bed, the well used leather holding a lot of happy memories.

The realization that she has remembered me keeping them there leads to the conclusion that she definitely put a lot of thought to this, letting me slide faster into the right mindset with small gestures like that. I know she has my list of limits, not that I think she could easily breach any of them with her very limited experience as Domme, but I trust her that she knows what she's doing. With the realization that I can fully relax into being her sub for this scene without having to worry - for her, not for me - about things going wrong, I feel the last of my reservations flee, not that there were many to start with. I trust her, and I trust her to do things the right way, as she always does.

Once I'm done I look up at her again, and feel like grinning stupidly when I see that she's still holding another item - a thick padded leather collar, matching the cuffs.

"Hands on your thighs," she commands, and I quickly obey, taking a deep breath when I feel the leather close around my throat. Bella makes sure the collar is sitting snugly but doesn't restrict my breathing even when she yanks hard on the D-ring at the back. My cock feels like bursting, and I silently laugh at my boyish impatience.

The collar now firmly in place I feel myself kneeling even straighter, and I love the still familiar restriction around my neck. At a poke from her I look up again, and Bella nods at the back part of the room.

"Set up the post and put one of the benches, knee high, with the long side towards the post up there. And don't dawdle, we don't have all day."

"Yes, Mistress!"

It's definitely the sensible decision to let me do the heavy lifting – not just because I'm stronger than she is, I know Bella can pull her weight – but the heels she is wearing are not made for such activities, and I have to admit, I get a certain kick out of having her watch me set things up. When I'm done I return to kneel before her again, and only belatedly notice her make-up.

What can I say, I'm like any other guy, I tend to look at the juicy, fleshy bits first. But she has put a lot of effort into it today, making her even more stunning. Normally Bella only uses make-up sparingly, but today the effect is rather dramatic. Dark eyes and lush, red lips, the same color as her nails –

if I'd ever had a doubt that she can be sex incarnate, they would have been destroyed today.

She looks down at me for another moment that seems endless to me, before she walks to the post and bench.

"Come over here and kneel on the bench, facing the room."

I quickly follow her order, and feel my pulse pick up when she steps around me, then takes first one of my arms, then the other, to attach the cuffs to the back of the post so that I have to stretch a little and keep a rather upright posture. She does the same to my ankle cuffs but in a way that leaves my legs more or less relaxed, but makes it impossible for me to change my position. I'm helpless now, at her mercy, and loving every second of it.

Once she is done securing me in place Bella wanders over to the toy rack, and after what looks a lot like playful consideration, she picks up one of the heavy leather floggers. I have to admit, I feel a spike of apprehension well up in me, but I know that she knows how that particular thing feels – with or without warmup. I also know that she is aware that I'm more into pain play than she is, and it occurs to me that maybe I should take this a little more serious than I've initially thought.

Stopping again in front of me Bella lets the strands of the flogger run over my spread thighs, and her grin brightens when she sees me shiver with anticipation. Her eyes light up further when she picks up the strands in her free hand, then lightly brings the flogger down on my left thigh, no more than stinging me lightly but still making me jump. She repeats the motion, and I have to admit, she knows how to do the slow, precise swings well.

Soon both of my thighs are warm and red from her not too tender administrations, but she still surprises me when she next hits my stomach, harder than my legs before. I groan involuntarily, and feel my cock twitch when there's no hint of mercy in her eyes.

"Oh, did that hurt my poor, little boy?" she taunts, then adds two similar strokes that make the flesh of my abs heat up fast.

"No, Mistress."

Bella purses her lips, the red lipstick glistening in the overhead lights.

"No? Then I definitely have to hit harder."

And she does, lashing my abs and pecs in quick succession, less precise now but with a lot more effect. I quickly push my head back to keep any stray strands from hitting my face, but none of them land above my clavicles. My whole chest is aching when she stops, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep any sounds of pain in.

"Now did that hurt?" she asks again, and this time I opt for the true answer.

"Yes, Mistress."

"Good," she purrs, then puts the flogger down on the bench next to my legs and walks back to her supplies. When she returns she is carrying something small and black in her hand, and I swallow hard when I see that it's a role of bondage tape.

"Hips forward as much as you can, and spread those pretty legs of yours,"

she directs in a playful tone. I follow suit as much as I'm able to, and hold my breath when I feel the back of her hand rub against my cock and balls.

Then she grabs my sac and squeezes, hard, making me yelp which she answers with a light laugh.

"Oh shut up, or shall I call you my little sissy boy from now on?"

I shake my head but it's hard to keep silent when I feel her wrap the black tape around the base of my cock and scrotum, with surprisingly precise motions. As if reading my mind she stops for a moment and smiles at me before she goes back to watching what she's doing.

"You are one lucky bastard, you know that? Beth had me practice this on her strap-on for like thirty minutes, and I swear, she was itching to add a real demo for teaching purposes. Thankfully Gerard was out of town on a conference that week. You'd get more than just your hide tanned if she'd made me tie his junk up."

That sounds exactly like Beth, and while I'm glad Bella got some hands-on practice, I can't help getting even more horny at the thought of that demonstration. I can see it right in my mind, Beth with her strap-on, probably over her jeans, yapping at Bella, kneeling in front of her, trying to get the tie right. And as much as I would have loved to be present in the room during that, I certainly appreciate the surprise.

A minute later she is done, and after making sure with a few hard tugs that everything is in place, she steps away from me again, leaving my dick and balls aching, and expertly restrained. I know that with the blood flow now restricted, my genitals will hurt, probably a lot, very soon, and reaching orgasm will be hard if not completely impossible, but I certainly don't feel like protesting.

After admiring her handiwork Bella picks up the flogger again and resumes whipping me, returning to a slower, more measured pace as she brings it down on my thighs, stomach and pecs. At first I'm a little worried that she might hit my bound cock, which is standing up obscenely hard, but none of her strokes stray from her intended target, and after a minute or two I relax.

As much as I can with the whole front of my body alight with light pain from the flogging, and my junk screaming for release.

Bella is quickly working up a sweat, as am I, and when she stops she's panting slightly. I have to grin when I see her huff and brush sweat off her brow with her arm, knowing all too well just how much work a good whipping is. Just my luck that she notices the expression before I can wipe it off my face. Her eyes narrow and she steps closer, sneering at me.

"So you find this funny?"

"No, Mistress."

"Then why are you grinning like a fool?"

Before I can answer she grabs my hair roughly and forces my head back, her face now right in front of mine.

"Or are you laughing at me?"

"No, Mistress, I'd never do that," I try to defend myself but my words don't pacify her.

"Maybe I have to teach you a lesson?" she suggests, then her eyes leave mine when she looks down between our bodies. My bound and straining dick grabs her attention, and I swallow hard when she lets go of me again.

The leather of the flogger strands is warm against my skin when she drags them slowly over my crotch, making my throat go tight with real dread, but it's actually her open palm that slaps my cock, not the impact toy. It still hurts like hell and I grunt loudly, then gasp when she slaps me again, harder now. I see her eyes flit over my face quickly, trying to assess how much of the pain is pleasure and how much actual discomfort, and I force myself to give her a miniscule nod to silently tell her to go ahead. A hint of a smile breaks through her scowl for a moment, but then she's back to looking severe, and smacks my cock around some more. As much as it hurts, I'm suddenly glad for the tape biting into my flesh, as I don't think I could have kept myself from coming otherwise. But fuck, that *hurts*.

Finally relenting Bella straightens again, her breathing even now.

"I hope that was enough to prove my point?"

"Yes, Mistress." She cocks one eyebrow, clearly waiting for something, and my sluggish brain is slow to catch up. She definitely likes to play things a little different than I do with her all the time. "Thank you for teaching me a lesson, Mistress."

She nods graciously, her offhand behavior a huge turn-on for me in itself, before she resumes flogging me. I realize that I'm definitely no longer used to this – she doesn't use too much force, and I'm sure I've gone harder on her several times myself, but before long the pain radiating from the harsh contact of the flogger on my skin becomes harder to cope with. I feel myself fidgeting, and as much as I still enjoy it, I'm still glad when she finally relents.

After putting the flogger away Bella returns empty-handed, and admires her work for a moment. Glancing down I see my chest and thighs are a uniform red on the fleshy parts she has been concentrating on, with a few darker striations where she has hit me harder. Her fingers are cool on my hot skin when she runs them over my chest, and I hiss when her gentle caress turns slightly painful as her red lacquered nails dig into my skin.

Smirking, she wraps her arms around my neck and crawls onto my lap, the soft lace of her thong pressing against my tormented cock when she brings her crotch flush with mine. I groan softly when she starts gyrating her hips, trapping my dick between my stomach and her cloth covered pussy while her hands run up and down my bound arms. All the while she stares into my eyes, and I'm the first one to break our gaze by closing my eyes for a moment.

"You've been such a good boy, Edward, taking the flogging so well. I think you deserve a reward."

My cock, having gone a little less hard during the last minutes, springs to full attention then. With a last, deep look into my eyes she pulls herself up into a standing position over me, then hooks her fingers into her thong and slowly steps out of it, leaving it discarded on my raging erection. Grinning down at me she re-arranges herself so that she's pretty much straddling my head, her pussy right in front of my face.

"You've been a good boy so you're allowed to please your Mistress," she clarifies, smiling. I can't say I'm terribly disappointed, and hurry to set to the task.

A low moan leaves her when she feels my tongue eagerly lapping between her labia until I find her clit, a most satisfying sound that urges me on.

She's already soaking wet, the scent of her arousal nearly overwhelming, and I groan myself when she suddenly grabs my hair and grinds her pussy into me, wanting, demanding. I do my best to lick and suck her while she more or less fucks herself on my face, her loud moans and whimpers driving me on. This is so unlike her but I love it, and the sight of her standing over me, her head thrown back when she finally orgasms is divine.

She wavers on her heels for a moment when she comes crashing down from her climax and I wish my hands were free to steady her, but she catches herself on the pole, then gingerly steps off the bench after kicking off her heels. Her chest heaving under the restriction of her corset does terrible things to my by now constantly aching cock, and a brief smile from her tells me she knows exactly what she's doing to me. I close my eyes when she extracts her panties from my dick, and I relax further when her fingers inspect the restrained flesh. Part of me wishes that she will take the tape off now but she leaves everything in place after making sure that it's safe to stay on a while longer. A last playful slap at my cock and she dances away, laughter trailing after her.

I try to calm down while she's busy setting up whatever comes next at the other side of the room. She grins when she catches me licking her juices off my lips as far as I can reach, but takes her sweet time. When she returns she does so with a plastic container holding whatever she has been fetching, but I can't see because of the towel she put on top of everything else.

Now unhampered by her heels she's quick in unfastening the cuffs from the pole, then has me crawling down onto the floor. She lets me stretch my legs a little before she orders me to follow her over to where the thick mats are, then clips my wrist cuffs together and secures them to one of the inlets in the floor with an extra snap hook. With deft slaps of her open palm she has me spread my thighs further but leaves my legs unrestrained, giving me enough wriggle space to relax my slightly aching muscles.

Following her motions in the mirror I see her kneel down behind me, and I arch my back and ass into her hand when she strokes me gently. A playful swat at my ass and she reaches into her box, retrieving a pair of latex gloves and a bottle of lube. Her eyes catch mine over the mirror and she winks at me as she puts on the gloves.

I shudder lightly when I feel the cool lube hitting my asshole, but it quickly warms up when her latex covered fingers start working it inside. The sensation of her slowly opening me up is a little unfamiliar but pleasant, and I let my head sink onto my forearms as I gradually relax. Bella stops for a moment, then I feel her resume, with her other hand, also covered with lube, wrapping around my cock and stroking me in time with her fingers penetrating me. Soon she has me uttering soft sounds as I try to hold still, not knowing if I should grind back against her fingers or thrust into her fist.

"You like that, don't you?" she asks, her smile clear in her voice.

"Yes, Mistress," I moan out, causing more of that delightful laughter to spill from her.

"You're such a slut."

I bite down on my lip to keep from snorting, then raise my head and look back at her as I answer.

"Yes, Mistress."

Her lips curl into a wicked grin and she lets go of my cock to slap my ass.

Then her fingers are gone from me completely, and I watch her fiddle with the towel covering the box. She produces a medium sized butt plug that quickly takes the place her fingers have previously occupied. I moan louder when she picks up fucking me with the black toy for a minute, and feel myself relax again when she pushes it in completely, creating a nice sensation of fullness.

Picking up the lube and something else I don't see Bella gets up and kneels down in front of me, her back facing me. Turning partly to me she inches closer, then grins brightly as she pushes her wet pussy and ass closer still.

"Be a nice boy and repay the favor, will you?"

A little unsure of what exactly she wanted of me I lick a slow line over her puffy, swollen lips, but get the hint when she reaches back with both of her hands, now once again uncovered, and spreads her cheeks for me. I'm a little surprised that she actually wants me to give her a rimjob as she usually flees blushing from me when I suggest it – unless I tie her down first

– but quickly rise to the challenge. Of course I can't see her face so I don't know if she's blushing now

or not, but the way she keeps moaning and sighing while I lave her puckered hole and ease my tongue into her shows me that she's highly enjoying myself.

I'm a little distressed when she moves out of my reach too soon, but when she reaches back around with a lubed up butt plug and starts sliding it in and out of her ass right in front of me, I don't really feel cheated of my fun.

She keeps watching me, then rearranges herself so that she's lying on her side, one leg raised, giving me an even better view of her while she goes on sodomizing herself.

"Do you like watching me fuck myself?"

I nod, only for a moment tearing my eyes from where the toy keeps disappearing into her, and she laughs at my inability to answer her properly. Bella takes her sweet time, and I wish she would let me eat her out while she continues, but I don't feel like she'd like me suggesting that.

It's clear that she enjoys being in control, and I don't want to make her feel like I don't appreciate that. A lot.

Finally she slides the plug home with a sigh, then gets up to walk back to her plastic container still sitting just out of sight for me. Wiping her fingers clean on the towel she reaches back inside, producing a black colored toy I'm unfamiliar with, but I can guess it's purpose. One side of it is shaped like a penis, the other, at a right angle, like an elongated egg. Bella grins as she holds it up for me to get a better look at it.

"Let's call it my birthday present to myself," she smiles, straightening, then puts one of her feet up onto my shoulder, spreading herself open that way.

I watch transfixed as she pushes the egg part of the toy into her pussy, sighing as it slides home easily.

"I've tried it without a plug first but it feels better this way. I definitely need to exercise my Kegels better to use it otherwise."

Reaching down for the lube she then spreads the clear liquid all over her

'cock', before she kneels on one leg behind me to slowly extract my plug.

"Just so you know, Beth laughed her ass off when I told her I want the

'stout' one. I mean we're both comfortable having a dick up our butts, so why bother with the slim or normal size?"

She doesn't leave me time to answer, not that I have anything to say to that quip, but goes right ahead and thrusts the dildo right into me. I grunt at the intrusion, surprised at her speed and force, but the toy keeps rubbing right at my prostate on it's way out again and the stunted protest dies on my lips.

I wonder for a moment where she has practised *this*, but when her hands grip my hips while she picks

up fucking me pretty much take away my ability to form even simple thoughts.

"Look at me," Bella suddenly pants, one hand leaving my hip to smack my ass hard. "Watch me fuck you!"

My head snaps up at her command, then to the side to get a better look. I nearly come right then, the pain in my cock instantly morphing to white hot need as I see her, pretty much uninhibited thrusting into me, her whole body moving with her hips. She catches my gaze over the mirror and grins, then speeds up further, rapidly decimating my control of myself.

"Please!" I pant, the one word all that will come forth. Trying again I add,

"please may I come, Mistress?"

She stops instantly, causing an unintended groan to come forth from me, but she lets that slide with a hard smack against my ass.

"No, I don't think so," she teases, panting, then resumes at a shallower, slower pace, driving me insane. I can now feel the head of the toy rub again my prostate the whole time, making it virtually impossible to hold back. I have no idea if she's doing it intentionally or not, but right then that really doesn't matter.

"Please! Mistress, please, let me come!"

The urgency in my voice must have given away my predicament because she stops again, her hands letting go to idly stroke my thighs and ass while she pushes the dildo deep into me. She seems to consider her options, then leans over me, her fingers dragging around my legs until she's cupping my aching balls. I pant at the contact, even her gentle touch eliciting new pain, and the slightly annoyed look leaves her face.

She lets go and the toy slips out of me when she gets up.

"Spread your legs wider," she commands, and I follow suit, unsure what she's up to now.

I'm surprised when she lies down on her back, then shimmies up between my thighs until her head and shoulders are under me. She smiles at me for a moment before she reaches for my balls again, caressing them lovingly while her lips wrap around my cock. I nearly scream at the joint sensation of pain and pleasure she's causing in me, and it takes a lot for me to hold still while she starts undoing the tape, now constantly sucking on my cock.

The sight of her bright red lips around me is too much for me, but a sudden squeeze of her hand around my balls stops my climax short. I still scream, my hips bucking for a moment.

Then the tape is off, and the pain of the blood surging back into my previously bound genitals makes my whole body sense up. Bella keeps sucking on my cock, harder now, but the intensity of the pain has successfully dragged me away from the point of no return. She seems to realize that soon and stops, then shimmies out from under me again to resume her previous position.

I arch my back when I feel the dildo slide back into my ass, and the slow but deep rhythm she pick up quickly eases the agony away. My cock is still hyper sensitive when she pushes herself up on my back and reaches under me to stroke it, making me buck back against the toy, driving it deeper.

Bella doesn't relent and keeps stroking me, and even though – or maybe because – my dick is still on fire, I'm hard again in no time.

Before long she has me panting and begging her once more, and I feel like screaming when she stops – again. I know this is probably payback for me playing with her like that before, but let's just say being on the receiving end of it is by far not as entertaining as being the mean bastard – or bitch – doing the teasing.

"How badly do you need to come?" she asks me, leaning forward so she can stroke my hair, then roughly pull my head back by it.

"Bad!" I pant out, making her laugh.

"Can you hold back a while longer if I let you come in my cunt instead of spraying your worthless jizz all over the floor now?"

I'm pretty sure she knows exactly what her using crude language does to me, and another grind of her hips against me renders me speechless for a few moments. Bella uses the time to idly lick at my shoulder, then sink her teeth into my muscles when I take too long with my reply.

"I'm gracious today, Edward, so I will not punish your shortcomings in answering me by just leaving you like this while I make you watch while I come using one of the vibrators. I'll even go so far to forgive you if you manage to hold back while I let you fuck my pussy. But if you come before I tell you, this will have severe consequences. So, again, can you hold back so I can use your cock properly, or do you have to come right away?"

The short respite my body gets while she is talking is enough for me to calm down a little.

"Please use me as you see fit, Mistress. I will do my best."

"Of course you will," she laughs, then gets off me, leaving me kneeling on the floor.

Bella unclasps my wrist cuffs from the anchoring point in the floor but leaves them chained together, then tells me to roll over onto my back. I do as ordered, watching her as she walks across the room, the toy still inside of her. She grimaces when she pulls first the plug, then the toy out, and sets to cleaning both. I figure she is nice and gives me some extra time to calm down, but I'm a little puzzled when she returns with the toy still in hand.

Grinning deviously, she reaches for the lube and applies it liberally to the egg end, then nudges my legs apart to slide it slowly into my ass. More lube gets applied to the cock end, now sticking up next to my equally erect dick, and I realize what she's up to.

Still highly amused Bella then mounts me, moaning loudly as she impales herself on both the toy cock in her ass, and mine in her pussy.

"Told you it was my present."

Putting her hands down square on my chest she starts moving up and down slowly, her eyes closed at first, her face slack with the pleasure clearly racing through her. Then she looks at me, smiling, and starts moving faster while one of her hands skims down between her legs where she starts to rub her clit.

I have serious trouble keeping myself from coming. Seeing her above me like that, the corset still encasing her upper body, her lips parted as moan after moan leaves her throat alone would normally be my end in itself. But the sensation of her hot, slick cunt gripping my tormented cock hard while she's tighter than usual due to the toy in her ass that somehow creates a different feel for me than when she's wearing a butt plug nearly kills me. I think it's sheer luck that I can hold out, although it gets harder when she urges me on in turn.

She's already starting to tremble with her impending climax when her eyes bear into mine, her whole upper body flushed from the exertion.

"You may come, but only after I'm finished. And you better keep fucking me until I'm done!"

Her words barely leave her lips before I feel her bearing down harder, then she's lost in the throes of passion. I do my best to keep thrusting into her, and at her nearly inaudible moan – "Come!" - I obey and shoot my load deep into her. It feels so fucking good that I nearly pass out, the weight of Bella sagging down onto me the only thing anchoring me here.

Once I stop panting loudly she kisses me with those luscious red lips, but before I can reciprocate she's off me, taking the toy out of my ass slowly.

I'm smiling when she rubs her fingers in our joined liquids seeping out of her, and eagerly suck them clean when she holds them up to my mouth.

The fact that I don't mind the taste of my own sperm always seems to amuse her, and even if I didn't, there's no reason for me not to oblige her.

"Good boy," she gently praises me, then kisses me again before she gets up and walks away, leaving me lying on the floor.

Bella returns to me shortly after taking the remaining used toys inside her box to the door, and slowly unfastens my cuffs. Once my wrists are free I try to reach for those on my ankles but she bats my hands away, rolling her eyes at me. The last thing that comes off is the collar, and I'm surprised at how lonely and *naked* that makes me feel. She smiles at me as she remains kneeling before me, my collar still in hand, watching me intently.

"Anything you would like to say before we end this?"

I wonder for a moment if I should thank her now, but there's something more pressing I need to tell her.

"I love you."

She grins, clearly surprised, then lets the collar slide onto the floor before she moves closer, straddling me. My arms come around her lower back while she treads her fingers through my sweaty hair, and this time it's an equal kiss, both of us giving and taking. I feel her relax against me but then she pulls away, her eyes sparkling with unspilled laughter.

"I think there is one last thing I will order you to perform for me."

"Everything you want, Mistress," I answer, now teasing her, but when her hand drifts down to my aching, flaccid cock I wince and sigh. "Well, everything except that, probably."

Her fingers squeeze me lightly but then she lets go.

"Don't worry, you've performed up to my expectations, and I'm not going to ask for a reprise so quickly. But be a dear and help peel your Mistress out of this horrible torture device that pretends to be a corset. I seriously don't think I can get it off by myself."

Laughing, I capture her mouth with mine for a quick but deep kiss, before I let my hands drift up to find the laces at the back.

"With pleasure."

It takes some fiddling and tugging to get them partly eased up so Bella can undo the hooks holding the front of the corset tightly together. She groans loudly when I help her pull the sweaty leather away from her body, discarding it on the mat next to us. Her groan turns into something between a sigh and a moan when I let my fingers skim over her back while my lips wander down her chest, kissing and lapping at her breasts.

"Fuck, that feels good!"

Holding her a little closer I roll us over, laying her down so I can let my hands and mouth roam all over her body. She keeps writhing under me, clearly enjoying herself while her fingers never leave my hair, not even when she decisively presses my head down between her legs. I cock one eyebrow as I look up at her face, only getting a wide grin in return.

"Oh just because you're done doesn't mean I am. And you told me I need to get more vocal and assertive, so this is me vocally and assertively telling you to eat me out! So what are you waiting for - aaah!"

I let her continue to be vocal for a while then, and it isn't exactly hard to make her come again after doing so already twice before. Her hands stay in my hair and I love the way she keeps scraping her nails over my scalp while her hips buck underneath me.

When she seems satisfied for good I move back up her body, kissing and licking every patch of her sweaty, slowly cooling skin that I can reach, until I am back at my preferred spot – making her squeal as I suck on the side of her neck. I'm a little tempted to leave a hickey but rein myself in before her skin can bruise up – as much as I love the idea of Bella being twitchy because Charlie might see it, I don't want him mad at me for marking his baby girl up. The irony of that thought cracks me up again, and I only stop chuckling when Bella kisses me.

"So," she starts once she can unglue myself from my lips.

"So?"

"So, how was I?"

I laugh at the expectant face she's making, then kiss her until her slight frown goes away.

"Amazing. Mean. Amazingly mean. My brain hasn't clocked back in for a more versed answer yet."

Seeing her bright smile warms my heart, and I have to kiss her, postponing any further discussion until we're both breathless and panting again.

Remembering that we have places to be I get up, and resisting the urge to just throw her over my shoulder as usual I offer her my hand instead.

Clearly thinking along the same lines as I Bella laughs and lets me draw her to her feet, and we exit the playroom together, taking the towel and toys with us to let them soak in the sink while we take a well needed shower together.

I'm still not quite out of my submissive head space when we hit the soothing spray, and Bella doesn't object when I take over soaping up her entire body, kissing and caressing her instead of my usual playful groping. She clearly enjoys herself, and doesn't comment when I try to be more of a gentleman than usual. I know she loves my obnoxious, teasing side but I have to admit, today of all days I'm more comfortable with not drawing reproachful stares at myself.

Lunch with Sue and Charlie is a surprisingly boring yet pleasantly comfortable affair, and later that afternoon Bella and I curl up on the couch in front of the tv together. Even with some stretching afterwards my muscles ache, and whenever anything rubs against my balls or cock I feel a slightly painful sensation spreading through my groin. It doesn't bother me, I've toughed out worse, but I'm still surprised Bella has been the one to cause it, all by herself. To say I'm amazed is really an understatement.

"So," I restart our previously dropped conversation as I feel her snuggling into my side, her hand idly stroking my thigh.

"So?" she echoes, then laughs. "Feeling more coherent now?"

"A little. So, how did you like our little session in the morning?"

Bella smiles, her fingers drawing idle patterns on my sweat pants.

"Shouldn't I ask you that first? I mean you were the one with a higher possibility of not liking everything there."

As if to underscore her words she reaches for my cock, eliciting a partly painful groan from me, but when she wants to withdraw her hand I stop her while I stare deeply into her eyes.

"Trust me, I might not have been up for a second round just then, but any residual ache will only keep me quite horny for the next day or so. Don't worry about me."

A somewhat hungry look passes her eyes for a moment, but Bella remains serious.

"Okay, feel free to live up to that claim until you have to leave for the hospital in, oh, three hours? Gonna be a long, lonely night, Dr. Cullen."

I wait until she's done laughing at me, and she luckily stops evading my question then.

"It was great, if a little scary. As you can guess Beth gave me a handful of pointers but I was still a little apprehensive at first. I mean, I get that you're the guy who loves having his junk all tied up but when I actually saw you cock go all red I wasn't so sure I wasn't entirely out of my league there."

"You know I would have used my safeword if I'd felt like you were having problems judging things, right?"

"You looked pretty much gone by the end."

Trying to kiss her frown away again, I smile reassuringly at her.

"Maybe, but not that far. I know how just about enough feels, and I also know how too much feels. You were well away from both all the time. Don't worry, unless we get really into switching and do this on a regular basis I will never entirely let my guard down. Not because I don't trust you, but because I'd rather break a scene myself than force you to deal with having to pick me off the floor, emotionally, when things go downhill fast."

She nods, looking relieved rather than miffed.

"Good. Because as much as I had fun today, and it really was great to make you beg for once, I don't think we'll ever get there."

Pushing herself up then she straddles me, letting her forehead touch mine.

"I just love being the one who does the begging too much."

We kiss for a while, until she pulls back, an expectant look on her face.

"Amazingly mean, eh? Care to elaborate?"

"Honestly, you really surprised me with how far you went and what you did, and not just because you woke me up at the crack of dawn. I have to admit, I really underestimated you."

She looks smug at that, then her face turns thoughtful.

"Well, I figured that when I do this, I might as well do it right and not half-ass it. And after our recent conversations I figured I should trust in myself to live up to my own expectations, seeing as I'm trying to get you to do the same."

Her words puzzle me, but only the part about myself.

"You think I don't do that?"

Bella shrugs, a little uncomfortable, but she replies nevertheless.

"Sometimes. I don't know, ever since things got okay between us again you seem so ready to set yourself up for disappointment. You know, eating everything up, waiting for the other shoe to drop, being all angry and reclusive. Sometimes I really think I'm the only one here who knows that you won't go off and disappoint me again."

I want to interrupt her there but she shushes me with her fingers pressed lightly against my mouth.

"Please, let me say this, then you can protest all you want. As I said before, I'm sorry I didn't realize that you were still beating yourself up over that whole fuckup with Jazz. I should have stepped out of my bubble and seen that this time it's not for the best to try to make everything right. You need time to heal, and that's okay. I never wanted you to feel like I'm not one hundred percent on your side. And while I might have reacted weirdly when you finally opened yourself to me, I really appreciate your openness. So in a way today was my little thank you for speaking your mind. I was hoping that when you saw me stepping out of my comfort zone simply because I could you'd feel better about returning to your own. And yes, I know I'm rambling and not making any sense here, but do you get what I mean?"

"I guess. If you can be in charge and fearless about messing up so can I, right? Thank you."

I first kiss her nose, then when she starts laughing devour her mouth instead until my lips are tingling. Bella is beaming at me when we part.

"And, you know, if it takes me fucking your ass on a regular basis so you get your confidence back, I can totally live with that. And I hope you love our new toy as much as I do."

"Definitely."

While she returns to my side for more snuggling, my mind mulls over what she just said.

"Do you really feel like I lost my confidence in myself?"

She seems surprised at the question but answers quickly.

"Not when you're in the playroom. But yes, sometimes when you shake off your damn hot badass Dom persona, you seem a little lost and disillusioned. Doesn't fit you, and there's no need for it, really. You're a great guy, and I'm not just saying that because you let me tie up your cock.

You definitely need to get rid of that insecurity again, asap."

I smile at the way she pops the P of the abbreviation, then incline my head.

"Okay. I'll try."

It's a weird thought, because I actually never felt not confident about myself, at least not for a long time now. Prone to fuck up, yes, but not on the scale Bella mentions.

"Awesome."

I laugh at her giddy tone, then feel my evil side rear it's head.

"You know what would help me?"

"No, what?" she asks eagerly.

"You not wearing any underwear until the play party at Beth's."

"What?"

Bella's indignant squeak makes me laugh, and I kiss her suddenly less than welcoming mouth.

"No panties then. You're right, I don't want other guys staring at your bouncing tits."

"How could that possibly help you regain your confidence?" she quips, but I can tell from the way she keeps rubbing her thighs together that the thought of going commando isn't so unappealing for her.

"For one, it's a huge turn-on for any Dom to know their sub is constantly available, and probably spending her time thinking about getting fucked. On the other hand, if you have confidence in me, it's easier to fall in line with you myself. And it's hard to keep moping around when you have the best of distractions ever strutting around partly naked."

Smiling sweetly Bella gets up then and dutifully ditches her panties before donning her yoga pants again.

"Happy?"

"Actually no because you dressed again, but happier, yes. And I'll be even happier when I see you wearing that corset again."

"Soon," Bella promises, then leans into me again. I can't help but smile. Life is good. And with every day it keeps getting a little better.

Chapter 14

As usual time flies when things are good, and before I know it, it is Friday evening, the day before Beth's play party. I have to admit, I'm excited about seeing some of the people of the community again I more or less lost contact with after Bella and I got together. Not that I have been avoiding them, on the contrary, but as we never actually got to go to any of the community events, be it a munch or a play party, I haven't seen most of them in months. Between working and being occupied keeping my lovely Bella happily satisfied, meeting others just doesn't have the priority it used to have. After all, one of the primary reasons I hung out with them all was to find someone to play with - and with that need no longer arising, I'm afraid I've turned into a veritable hermit.

"Why are you grinning like that?"

I turn my head and try to smother my excitement a little, seeing as Bella doesn't seem to share it - at least not without some reservations. She's been mostly quiet tonight, which is rather unusual for her.

"Ah, nothing."

"Don't you 'nothing' me, I know that look, Edward."

Deciding to keep things light, I let some of the lust I feel seep into my gaze.

"Guess."

A hint of a blush graces her cheeks when realization hits her, but Bella keeps her calm.

"So much for your promise to be at your best behavior tomorrow," she huffs.

I shrug, then lean closer to her so I can kiss her jaw gently.

"I don't intend to break my word. But that doesn't mean I have to sit on my hands and be all glum about it, and turn into some kind of Kink Grinch or something."

A bright smile takes over her face at that, and she shakes her head in silent laughter. When she turns to look at me again a residue of that mirth remains, plastering a similar smile onto my face in turn.

"While it's a little disconcerting, it's good to see you so carefree again."

"Carefree?" I prompt, then, "disconcerting?"

"You know, that thing where you don't expect hell to swallow you up and hurl you into an abyss of eternal torment? And disconcerting because I can guess why you're so damn happy to go there," she grumbles.

"Which is?"

Bella glares at me for a moment, her smile slowly draining from her face, but then she actually looks aggravated rather than petulantly grumpy.

"Because you finally get to meet your friends again, friends I've inadvertently kept you from. I'm sure you must be looking forward to seeing them again."

"Sure I do," I admit, wondering why she seems so moody. "But you haven't *kept* me from anyone. I just prefer your company to those of others. And you know that I'm usually working at least parts of the weekends, so it had nothing to do with you in most cases anyway."

I can see that she doesn't buy my attempt to lighten her mood, so I reach over and gently cup her cheek, stroking her softly. She closes her eyes and leans into my touch, and I can feel her relax.

"You know, for all the fun you have when playing the mean badass, you're still a bad liar, Edward."

Her suddenly teasing tone makes me crack up, and I'm relieved her smile is back when I quiet down again. Still feeling like I should set her straight on this, I draw her closer to me until her knee is touching my thigh where she's sitting next to me on the couch.

"Okay, yes, you might be the reason why I lost touch with some of them."

But in a good way. I've been lonely for so long, so I had the time and drive to be pretty active in the community. Since we hooked up I don't need to find someone else, because I already have you, the woman of my dreams.

Also, it's much more convenient to order you to kneel before me and suck me off than go out, find a sub who is maybe compatible with my preferences, and after endless negotiations have them do the same. So don't feel bad from keeping me from that, you actually preserve what little free time I have left."

I don't even try to evade her punch, but wince slightly when her fist connects with my upper arm. For a moment I'm tempted to launch myself at her and ravish her on the floor while I keep her pinned and helpless, but like so often, I don't think letting sex distract our conversation is a good idea. And I can still do the ravishing later.

"You cocky bastard," Bella huffs, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Why, yes, I think that's one of my more redeeming qualities?"

She rolls her eyes at me but when I don't react she exhales loudly, and I can see her eyes cloud over with concern again.

"Okay, I see I can't nudge you into us not having this conversation. You really used to be easier to manipulate when our relationship was days old and you were horny non-stop."

"Trust me, the horniness hasn't receded that much. And you shouldn't even try to manipulate me, ever."

She huffs again, unperturbed by my slightly chiding tone.

"Gee, yeah, I know, me bad, bad sub for attempting to top from the bottom.

Feel free to spank my bad sub bottom any time for it. But that aside, you know what I mean."

"Just spit it out, what has your panties in a twist?" There I feel my smile morph into a lopsided grin again. "Oh, right, you aren't wearing any panties!

How could I forget that."

Her weighted gaze is answer enough, but she goes on without letting me tease her too much.

"There will probably be several of your previous subs there, too, right?"

I nod, momentarily not quite understanding why she's suddenly starting to fidget, but then the proverbial light bulb goes on in my mind.

"Are you jealous because I played with them before we got together?"

"No, of course not, I'm -"

She trails off with a huff, then shakes her head as if to underscore her words, but the way she keeps avoiding me tells a different tale. I briefly consider assuring her she has nothing to fear, but then decide against it.

This is rapidly turning into one of those moments were Bella acts like a stereotypical woman - although she has yet to ask me if I think she looks fat in skinny jeans - and I feel like I have to stop this, right now.

"Bella," I say, stressing her name enough for her eyes to quickly move to my face.

"Hm?"

I can tell she's playing dumb, or deliberately trying to ignore the implication of my change in tone.

"Get up and stand in front of me."

She moves quickly enough that I realize that she knows what I'm up to, although the look on her face is a very long shot from meek.

"Strip."

She slides down her pants without protest and leaves them pooling on the floor, then pulls her shirt over her head and unclasps her bra, all without hesitation. Her step towards me causes her knees to brush between my spread legs where she stops, and with some afterthought she brings her arms behind her back, loosely clasping the opposite elbow with her hands.

I let my eyes roam over her beautiful body, giving her time to see how much I appreciate the view, before I beckon her towards me.

"Straddle my legs."

She lithely climbs onto my lap, her naked thighs pressing into the rough denim of my jeans. I run my hands up and down her legs, pleased that she keeps her arms where they are while her spine is straight, her head upright, not a hint of shame anywhere in her posture.

"Good girl."

A smile is tugging on the corner of her mouth as she inclines her head, then murmurs softly, "Thank you, Master."

Of course now my cock's as hard as ever and begging to be buried in her warm, willing cunt spread right before me, but I do my best not to lose my calm. For one I'm doing this for a reason, and getting the right answers out of her should go before satisfying my need. Although demanding her to give them while I fuck the living shit out of her is appealing, too.

"Let's try this again. Why are you so twitchy and broody tonight? You said before you wanted to go to this play party, I hope you didn't lie to me then?"

She shakes her head without hesitation, her eyes seeking mine to convey her honesty better.

"Of course I didn't lie. I'm really looking forward to it. I'm exited and scared out of my mind at the same time. I think that's making me a little irrational, Sir."

I smile my encouragement at her while my hands find her ass, kneading her taut muscles there.

"And?"

"And I guess while I'm not exactly jealous of you playing with others before me, I'm apprehensive of meeting them. I know my own limits are quite lower than some of theirs probably were, and I think that makes me feel kind of ... inadequate."

Somehow that is like deja-vu to me.

"Do we really have to have this conversation again, Bella?" I gently chide her, and a hint of a shameful blush appears high on her cheeks.

"No, Sir. As I said, it's kind of irrational. I know you chose me, and yes, I *am* quite aware that you see more in me than a pair of tits and an ass you can spank at will."

"But?"

It's a little like pulling teeth, having to drag everything out of her like this, but I know eventually my patience will pay off. Bella sighs, somewhat dejectedly, and lowers her voice to the point where I'm

wondering if she's trying to break role or just feeling stupid for voicing her thoughts.

"I'm having a bad case of stage fright. You know, like I'll do something incredibly infantile or mess up, and they'll all either pity me or ask themselves how much you must have hurt your head to stoop so low to take someone like me as your sub. When you could have had any of them.

Again."

It hurts me to see her confidence waver like that, but before I can chime in she goes on, her voice regaining strength fast.

"Not that I care so much. I know you love me, the same as I love you. I know they know I'm still more or less new to this so if I mess up they'll probably ignore it anyway. I wish I just wouldn't care what anyone thinks about me, but I want to be your super duper fantastic sub you can be proud of and -"

She trails off, then swallows convulsively and her eyes leave my face as she forces herself to go on.

"And parade around and show everyone how lucky you are to have me. I want to be insanely happy and lose myself in feeling loved and cherished by you, as your sub, and have a real reason for that. And not feel stupid for just having said that, Sir."

I have to admit, her little diatribe is highly amusing, and I pinch her ass cheek lightly until she makes a face.

"You know you don't have to do anything there? *We* don't have to do anything there? Just stand around, talk, enjoy the company is fine, too."

Bella nods, and after chewing on her lip she catches my gaze again.

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate your lenience with me here. But I know you want to play, and so do I. It's just that I'm a little afraid you'll push me and I'll make an ass of myself because of some idiocy and disappoint you."

"You can't disappoint me, Bella."

She smiles again at my reassurance, but isn't convinced.

"It has happened in the past. And not to be pesky, Master, but you *do* have a habit of pushing me beyond my comfort zone. Or you used to."

I'm surprised how dejected the last part sounds, but decide to store that away for a later conversation, after all this is over.

"Do you mean you expect me to do that tomorrow? To embarrass you in front of everyone by inadvertently making you mess up because I pressure you too much?"

I try not to sound hurt but I think I'm not doing a good job, from the way she tenses up. I'm even more

surprised when she nods.

"Seriously?"

My unbelieving snort causes her to look away once more, but a quick slap on her ass has her attention focused on my face once again.

"That actually wasn't a hypothetical question."

"I am. Kind of."

"Kind of?"

She cringes at my hard tone but nods.

"Yes."

I don't really know what to say. I mean I can tell that she's trying to get a rouse out of me, and part of me thinks that alone warrants a quick and painful reminder that it's not her place to attempt that - as we don't play things this way. But I don't think whacking her ass good today will help the problem at hand that I haven't realized exists until a few minutes ago.

"What do you think I should do now?" I ask instead.

She seems puzzled for a moment and her composure crumbles a little, but after a little fidgeting she straightens again, looking more confident.

"I think you shouldn't give me the option not to play tomorrow. And you should plan for something that is a little challenging for me, not enough to make me fail but still press me. I think it would make both of us feel good if that works. And if it doesn't, we can still laugh over it for the next few years."

I actually like her suggestion, and it reminds me of our conversation after our switching scene. Building confidence alright. And I feel like kissing her when she adds, somewhat dejectedly, "And you should probably spank me soundly for trying to make you do all that instead of just telling you that idea of mine straight out."

Her eyes are gleaming when I dig my hands into her ass, then let them drop to her thighs. My thoughts are racing, trying to decide what to do with her tomorrow and whether I should tell her about it now, when I realize something else.

"Get up and fetch me the print-outs that are in the red folder on the desk."

She inclines her head and shimmies off me, then scurries off to do my bidding. I have to grin when she returns, her hands still behind her back, with the papers clasped in her mouth. I wait until she has resumed her previous position, then tug the print-outs from between her lips.

"Know what that is?"

"A list. List of limits for tomorrow, I presume."

I nod, then lean forward into her so I can grab a pencil from the coffee table. Bella shudders slightly when my breath skims over her nipples but remains still otherwise, even when I push the papers against her stomach so I can take notes on them.

"Did you read it through?"

"No, Sir, I just took a glance."

I nod, then quickly browse the items on the list I've typed earlier. It's a very abbreviated list, only with the activities I would consider important for an event like this, knowing what Bella likes and what Beth's playroom holds -

although the latter is clearly not as limiting as the former.

"We'll work through it now, together, and I want you to tell me yes or no on every item depending on whether you'll want to engage in that activity tomorrow or not, and if so, rate them from one - not desirable to five - highly anticipated."

She doesn't hesitate with answering, and none of her options surprises me as almost all of those that deviate from the first lists of things she wanted to try after first meeting Beth are things we've explored together. Bella is more than okay with light impact play, light bondage and sex, I'm quite happy she puts heavy impact play still at a three, and as usual, what she shuts me down on are her feet, but still at a one. The only thing that causes her to quirm is me actually jutting down the numbers on the paper where the pencil tickles her skin, but I ignore that mostly.

Then there's only one thing left to ask.

"What do you think of playing with others?"

Her inhale sounds a little pressed, and I watch her swallow repeatedly before she answers.

"I'm not okay doing anything without you involved, Sir."

"And if I'm involved?"

Another shaky breath escapes her, and I can tell she's waring with herself to find an answer.

"Voice your thoughts."

My command clearly surprises her, but after a moment she inclines her head in defeat.

"I guess it would be kind of hot to involve someone else, at least on a small scale. But I don't want anyone except you to fuck me. And I don't know if I'm comfortable with having someone I don't know touch me."

"Because you don't trust them?"

"Exactly."

"What if I trust them?"

I can tell that she wants to tell me that she's not comfortable with that anyway, and it won't surprise me if she tells me she only considers Beth as okay to be included. A few moments pass and I don't feel the need to stress her, instead I leave her the time she needs to find her answer.

"If you trust them, then I say yes. But with reservations, so one."

I gently stroke her ass for taking that step I haven't expected her to, and I can see a hint of pride glowing on her face. That pretty much decides things for me, and after jutting down that last note I put the paper and pencil down on the table.

"Very well. Then let's talk about that punishment."

She swallows thickly but doesn't react any other way, clearly prepared to take whatever I wish to dish out in silence.

"You are right, I cannot let it slip that you think it's okay to hold something back from me, but I don't think it's a capital offense as you used the next chance you got to be open with me. A spanking will do, and you will go unsatisfied until we get to the party tomorrow."

"Thank you, Master."

As usual my cock screams bloody murder that I inadvertantly cheat myself of fucking her - because I know Bella well enough that even if I don't let her come she will still have a good time on the way there until I stop her - but I do my best to ignore my dick. Instead I tell Bella to lie down on my lap, ass up, and she quickly assumes position. I pat her softly on her supple rump for putting her hands yes again behind her back even though that means that her tits and face are pressed firmly into the couch. Grasping her arms as I press them into her lower back, I start.

Her whole body goes rigid when I slap her ass hard, not dallying with any warm-up. I know I'm really hurting her that way but as this *is* intended as punishment, I don't really care. Small gasps and mewling sounds escape her as I continue to spank her, hard and fast, and as my palm begins to sting her ass cheeks get redder and redder by the minute.

Pausing for a moment I rub her hot skin gently, and she relaxes a bit. I smirk when I feel her crotch rub against my erection while she spreads her legs slightly but I ignore both. If it were playful spanking I'd rub her clit and finger fuck her now to take the sting off the spanking, but today her wet pussy goes unattended.

"We should talk about what you'll be wearing tomorrow," I start as I pick up slapping her butt. Bella squirms at the first slaps but then quiets, her pants and hisses loud in the silence between my words. I've initially thought that the black leather corset would be a good choice, but I know she'll associate

it with our scene now, and after what we just talked about, that's not going to happen.

She wants to be my perfect sub? I'm only too happy to oblige her then.

I go on explaining while I continue to spank her ass, now somewhat less forcefully but still enough to make her squirm once in a while.

"I want you to wear your new blue corset, the softer satin one. Do you have anything suitable to wear underneath?"

I seriously don't know ninety percent of the clothes Bella owns. I know she has the two corsets she got as a present from me. I know some of her more sexy underwear, and one dress that drives me crazy. But the rest are just that, clothes, and I generally don't really care about them as I'm more interested in what they hide than how they represent her beautiful body.

"Like a blouse, Sir?"

"Think again," I grunt, the three subsequent slaps harder than those before.

Bella groans while she presses her face into the cushions of the couch, trying to stifle the sounds. When I ease up again a little she comes forth with a much better suggestion.

"I have a more or less see-through top Alice brought me from Spain. The black one I usually wear with a tank top underneath?"

That rings a very dim bell, but it sounds sufficient.

"You will wear that top underneath the corset, but of course without a bra or anything else."

Bella slumps at hearing my words and the clear implication that while theoretically dressed, her tits will be quite on display above the underbust corset, but of course she doesn't object.

"You told me you got a suitable skirt?"

"Yes, Sir, a short wrap around one with a tie at the waistband."

"You will wear that. No panties. No stockings or hose, and I want you barefoot."

Increasing the force behind the spanking one last time I add, "And you will wear a leather collar so everyone sees at once that you're my beautiful sub."

My last slap is by far the hardest, hard enough to be painful for me, too, and Bella screams loud for a second or two. She instantly relaxes when I let go of her and rub her aching butt gently. Now unrestrained she brings her hands underneath her head, cushioning her face as she eases herself further into my touch. I'm impressed that she's taken the spanking so well, and the devious part of my mind is quite gleeful about the fact that tomorrow her ass will be sore still and might bear a few light bruises.

Those thoughts only worsen the ache in my cock, and I decide it's about time to ease that strain.

"Up you go," I nudge her lightly, and Bella flops off my lap into a crouch, a lot less gracefully than before. Her near silent groan when she stretches makes my dick jump, and I nod down at the bulge in my jeans. "Do something about that."

Bella licks her lips, then looks a little sheepish as she kneels down before me, reaching for the button on my fly.

"With pleasure, Master."

Her mouth is hot and wet when she takes my cock in, one of her hands wrapped around my shaft, the other gently massaging my balls. I thread my hands into her hair to ease her into the right rhythm but otherwise let her work as she sucks me off, her red ass as much of a visual turn-on as my cock disappearing between her lips.

It doesn't take her long to make me come deep down her throat, and I just smirk at the face she briefly makes at the taste of my jizz. I think between the two of us, I'm the one who minds less, which kind of adds to the fun for me. Once she's done packing me up again I pat the couch next to me, making her crawl closer where she curls up as I hug her, still buck naked and clearly content.

I kiss her hair softly as I turn on the TV, and we spend the evening like that.

I still have to grin everytime she re-arranges herself and emits a low groan or gasp of discomfort, but she never complains, and I love her even more for being what she is, even though she sometimes still seems to need some reassurance - my perfect woman.

Chapter 15

I can tell that Bella is incredibly nervous when she straightens before me for a last inspection. She is absolutely stunning and I hate myself for being so dumb to actually think - even for a moment - that it's a good idea to go to the party. Because I really need to fuck her, right now, and I know that if I give in we won't even get out of our bedroom for the next hours.

Sometimes I really wonder why I've ever been proud of my self-restraint, too.

Normally Bella is all for understated make-up, but just like with our last scene, today she has put real effort into her appearance. Her hair is freshly washed and cascades down her shoulders in shining, brown curls, a few strands gathered at the back of her head to keep them clear off her face.

Her eyes look even more expressive than usual with the heavy dark makeup, and her lips shine with the softest of pink hues. That I notice all this is my effort to keep from staring at the rest of her body too much, I have to admit, but she did a great job that actually deserves to be admired -

I'm just not the right guy for that.

What's more distracting is what she's wearing, just what I told her to yesterday. The short-sleeved dark top is so sheer that I have no problems watching her nipples harden under my scrutiny, where her breasts are slightly supported by the corset stopping right underneath them. The bright cyan satin of the corset, set off by a patterns of golden leaves and swirls, covers her from there on down to the swell of her hips. Already her waist is tightly constrained by the garment and I can't wait to tighten the laces further once we are at Beth's, but I figure I'll leave her more breathing capacity for the car ride. The outfit is completed by a black wrap skirt that hits her mid-thigh when she's standing straight, but rides up to not even cover her ass when she bends down enough to put her palms onto the floor. I love how that leaves her pussy completely exposed, but I only slap her ass instead of grope her to make her straighten up again. She yelps loudly when my palm hits her butt where a few patches of skin are still red from yesterday.

"Beautiful," I murmur when she's facing me again, my words easing her visibly as she exhales slowly.

I get up and nod at the remaining garments I had her pick before - a long, flowing skirt to hide her legs down to her ankles, and a light sweater to cover her chest.

My own outfit needs a lot less work to be safe for the street as I don't really stick out with my black leather pants, gray shirt and dress shoes.

When she's done slipping on her sandals I pick up the pre-packed gym bag already waiting by the door, and we leave, Bella's fingers tightly wrapped around my own hand until she has to let go to climb into the passenger seat of the car.

I try to make light conversation but only get monosyllabic answers from her so I put on a CD instead and hope the music does a better job easing her tension a little. I'm still happy that before she gets out

of the car again Bella suddenly leans over and kisses me hungrily, excitement winning over fear for a few moments.

"Try to relax a bit. Nothing bad's gonna happen, you know that. After all this party is under Beth's supervision, and she'd have my ass if I didn't take good care of you."

She nods, and I smile when she takes a few deep breaths.

"You know, I think I'll be really glad when you finally get to do what you wanna do to me, because the tension's killing me!"

I kiss her instead of an answer, much slower and gentle, making her melt into me and relax - until I reach up and pinch her nipple hard through the soft fabric of the sweater. Her yelp around my tongue makes my cock itch, and I pull away from Bella before we get stranded in the car.

"Come on, then, can't wait to get you out of all that loose fabric."

I catch her rolling her eyes at me when I turn my back on her, but I let it slide - for now. Weirdly enough she seems to calm down further as we walk down the street to our destination, just two people strolling around town on a cloudy Saturday mid-morning. Once inside the atrium of Beth's house I ring the bell next to the unassuming door down into the basement, knowing that today it will be locked to ensure privacy to anyone inside.

Bella self-consciously picks some invisible lint off her sweater, then jumps a little as the door opens, her hand squeezing mine for support. I'm not surprised to see Raven, Beth's somewhat obnoxious employee look us over, then quickly step aside to let us in.

"Master Edward, welcome," she chimes, beaming at me after a very quick glance at Bella.

I do my best to rein in the scowl that wants to take over my forehead, then hug Bella closer while I smile down at her. Even jumpy as she is I can tell she didn't miss Raven more or less ignoring her, and it clearly doesn't sit well with her.

"Hi, Raven, I think you've met my lovely fiancée Bella before?"

Instantly slipping out of her sub persona she has been letting roam free pretty much since yesterday evening Bella smiles brightly at the dark-haired woman in front of her, while her gaze is clearly challenging.

"Oh hi, Raven, so nice to see you here! I didn't expect Beth to actually invite her employees for the party, but I guess someone has to man the door to leave our wonderful hostess to her duties?"

Raven blinks, then stares at me as if to urge me into action, but I remain still with my suddenly much less fake smile on my face.

"Ah, yeah, I mean, yes, of course, I'm glad Mistress Beth invited me.

Please come in."

I nod my thanks and then lead Bella inside, not letting my hand slip from around her waist. Once we are out of earshot I lean closer, whispering softly into her ear.

"I know why you did it, but that still earns you twenty with whatever impact toy I'll use on your sorry ass later."

Bella slowly looks up, blinking her suddenly huge eyes almost innocently, before she winks.

"So worth it."

I laugh as I lightly swat her ass, then continue our descent into the basement with Bella laughing under her breath. As much as I resented Raven's attitude, I have to admit the brief encounter has pretty much eased my girl's anxiety, and for that I am grateful.

Below the room normally only occupied by the easy chairs and sofa has been transformed into the main non-play area, just as usual. A couple of tables are stacked with food and drinks, and at my absent nod Bella puts down the box of brownies she's baked yesterday afternoon to add to the refreshments. I know some communities do it differently, but with ours we always bring something to eat as a thank you to our hostess, and to provide sustenance as needed - and turn the party into a real party. While it would be stupid to assume that anyone ever shows up only for the company, our gatherings were never just about getting our kink on. We also have a no booze, no drugs, no smoking policy, and attendance is usually invite only, or with someone who is already part of the community.

In the nearly six years I'm part of this wonderful gang of weirdos we've never had any problems, and I think it's mostly up to Beth's no nonsense policy when it comes to the parties. You fuck with her, you get thrown out, and as hostess she sees herself responsible for everyone's physical and emotional well-being here. And as I've secretly hoped, Bella relaxes even further when Beth, in all her glory, approaches us, quickly hugging us both.

"So glad to finally see you two at a social function again!"

I pretend to hang my head in shame for a moment, prompting her to laugh loudly, and I'm sure that if Bella weren't my sub Beth might have smacked my ass. It's a little weird to see Beth's demeanor towards me has changed, but I guess it's more for Bella's benefit than mine. While Bella scurries off to the bathroom I quickly peek into the main playroom, before I return to where Beth is stacking plastic cups and plates near the refreshments.

As usual for the parties, Beth is looking fabulous. Her supple breasts are squeezed into a tight white leather corset that reaches down to below her hips, with a long, black leather skirt to complement her outfit, with her hair twisted up into a severe chignon at the back of her head. Beth is a tall woman as it is, but with her high heels on I can look her in the eye comfortably today.

"You got your lists?"

"Of course," I snort, handing her two sheets of paper. Disregarding mine completely she scans Bella's

briefly. I know later, before the official play part of the party will begin, she will have memorized everyone's limits to a T, and make sure no one breaches any.

"Are you going to play today?"

"Yes."

Her brows rise as she folds the papers.

"So decisive, no 'yes, maybe', 'yes, if Bella looks ready to tear my pants down any minute', but simply yes?"

I just nod.

"Hm," she smacks her lips, then draws herself up to her full height. "Any concrete ideas already, I presume? What do you need?"

"I've got a plan, but it's not going to be very elaborate. More of a mind thing.

I just need your whipping bench, if I could borrow it for maybe half an hour?"

"Of course. I guess as she's still more or less a novice when it comes to parties you'll want one of the screens, too, to provide a little privacy?"

Grinning at her indication of the portable room dividers, I shake my head.

"Nope, up on the center stage should be just fine."

Her lips curl into a devious smile as she studies me, then nods.

"Just what exactly do you have in mind for your delectable sub?"

I think that's the first time ever I hear her refer to Bella as anything but the woman in my life, but I have to admit, it's a pleasant change.

"Let's just say she feels a little anxious about not living up to her own standards, and I figure it will stroke her ego nicely if she can tough things out in front of everyone. You know they don't care if she flinches at the first gentle swat or takes a heavy caning in silence, but I think for her it makes a huge difference."

Beth considers that but doesn't offer her opinion, which is about as much of a 'go for it' as I'm likely going to get.

"Are you going to play with anyone else today?"

"Of course not."

Her nod is definitely approving.

"Do you need any props?"

"No, I have everything here," I indicate my goody bag. "But I might ask a few people to lend me a hand."

Now she frowns, and checks Bella's list.

"She doesn't seem too thrilled at the idea."

"But she didn't set it as a hard limit."

"Some consider a low mark as a soft limit, though."

I felt my ire rise its ugly head, my spine straightening of itself.

"I'm her Master. It's my right to push her soft limits. Are you saying you disagree?"

The moment the words leave my mouth I want to call them back but force myself not to back down or show even a hint of doubt, and after a moment Beth's grinning at me again.

"Of course not, and I'm sure neither does your girl. Welcome back."

I wonder what exactly she's meaning with that but Bella's return cuts our conversation short. She looks slightly uncomfortable as she pads on naked feet over to us, but her shoulders are pushed back confidently, and she doesn't lower her gaze until she stops in front of me. Unprompted she turns around so I can tighten the laces of her corset, cinching her waist but leaving still some ease over her ribcage. She immediately assumes a fully upright stance, her tits sticking out while she attempts to find a good breathing pattern with the new strain on her chest, and I use her moment of distraction to slip the leather collar closed around her throat.

It's not the collar that fits her wristband but a soft strip of leather, lightly padded. With her hair hiding the buckle at the back of her neck it looks more like jewelry than restraint, and Bella smiles up at me when I give her a last once-over.

"Perfect."

Beth heaves a playfully exasperated sigh when I kiss Bella deeply, taking my time to rub my tongue along hers, but she's still smiling when I unwillingly break away.

"Let me guess, in forty years from now you'll be one of these embarrassing couples who still have to grope each other's flabby asses and giggle while you're still so damn much in love with each other?"

"I'm fully counting on it," Bella laughs, but after a moment cuts herself off, giving me a weird look.

"Uhm, actually I'm not quite sure how to, ah, behave myself today?"

I grin at her at her question, but it is Beth who answers.

"Of course it's your Master's right to impose his own rules on you, but the general house rules are that you try to keep up a friendly, polite code of conduct, while being your chipper self. If, as a sub, you feel like it is easier for you not to address any tops you talk to by their names you might want to stick to the usual 'Madam' or 'Sir', unless they allow or require of you to call them by any other designation." She then leans a little closer, winking conspiratorially. "There are a few sticklers for proper behavior around, so if you want to impress them with your submissive obedience towards your Dom, stick with calling him 'Master' exclusively today. You know I don't give a damn, but then I don't need words to know I'm in charge."

Both women laugh lightly then, and I'm happy when Bella's smile doesn't dissipate even when I pull her close and not so subtly grope her ass underneath her skirt, making the fabric ride up high.

"Did your dear girl at the door get that memo about addressing people the right way, too?"

Beth purses her lips in irritation, her smile from before gone.

"Please don't tell me she did it again?"

"She did," I confirm her suspicion.

Beth sighs, her eyes briefly flitting to Bella's face. Whatever she sees there causes her to stop scowling, but she still doesn't fully relax.

"I'll better go talk to Raven now before she gets into any trouble. I figured after she was all cordial to Charlotte that she had stopped this for good."

She then bustles off towards the entrance of her dungeon, leaving us to ourselves. I briefly dig my fingers into Bella's ass before I let go of her, then put my arm around her waist as I put the bag onto the floor at the entrance of the playroom, where three similar ones are already stored. As I lead Bella inside for a lazy stroll around I scan the room, pleasantly surprised to find a few old friends already in attendance.

A little timid at first Bella soon behaves like herself as I make the introductions, and small talk ensues. She's a little less talkative than usual as her eyes keep flitting all over the set-up of the room and the people arriving, but she looks pretty much at ease.

Beth joins us again as we chat with Peter and Charlotte, two of the people Bella knows from before. At her suggestion Beth 'kidnaps' our ladies, leaving Peter and me standing around empty handed in every sense of the word. Peter is still following his wife's latex clad ass with his eyes as he turns back to me.

"I take it things are going well as you finally grace us with your presence again?"

I laugh at that, and shrug.

"Well enough, yes. And it really would have pained me to miss your demonstration."

"Nothing you haven't done yourself before, actually with Charlotte herself if I recall," he replies, but I can tell that he's happy about my unspoken compliment of his skill with rope.

Beth might have been the one to truly initiate me into the world of BDSM, but most of what I know about being a Dom I've learned from Peter. Like me he shares a fascination for bondage, although unlike me he's happy to leave it at creating a work of art with tied bodies and miles of hemp rope. I knew I had to come here when Beth told me he was demonstrating a few ties with Charlotte today, and I'm happy things worked out so well.

Our talk then turns to what exactly he has planned, and before long he asks the question I've been hoping he would pose.

"And what are you planning with Bella?"

"Actually I might need your help there, if Charlotte's okay with it."

I then share my plan with him, and I can see his interest is piqued. We then continue to talk about other things as I know he won't agree until he has talked with his wife, but I haven't expected anything else from him.

While Bella is still busy chatting with the other two women I quickly make the same suggestion to a few more people before I catch up with my lovely, semi naked fiancée again. I smile to myself when I see Peter draw Charlotte away, and after a brief conversation they both give me a thumbs-up. Beth has to bustle off to attend to her other guests, leaving Bella and me blissfully alone for the moment so I can continue our stroll from before.

"Any more questions that need answering popped up in your head in the meantime?"

Bella shakes her head, but then looks towards the 'stage', a raised wooden dais about five by three yards long.

"So this is where they'll do the rope bondage demonstration you told me about?"

I nod, turning away slightly not to give anything away with the grin suddenly plastered to my face.

"Exactly."

"Did I get this right, first we have our little meet and greet thing here until everyone arrives, then Peter and Charlotte do the demo, and then let the games begin?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Not that much to it, you know?"

She smiles at me coyly then.

"I'm sure the 'not much to it' part will be interesting enough, don't you think?"

"I certainly hope so."

Bella groans into my mouth when I tug her close and kiss her fervently, before I lead her back outside to get some coffee and do a little more socializing.

Before long Bella's remaining giddiness about disappears, even though I can tell that her partial state of undress is bothering her a little whenever someone glances at her more or less exposed breasts. It seems to help a little that several people - of both sexes - are wearing a lot less, but she blushes when a while later Gerard brings in a platter full of sandwiches wearing nothing except for a clear plastic cock cage and a few stark red cane marks on his ass.

"Looks like you haven't been the only one not on their best behavior yesterday," I whisper to Bella, who can't quite tear her eyes off Beth's slave when he sinks obediently to his knees at his Mistress's side.

"Shouldn't we, ah, go say hello to him, too?"

I shake my head, then at her puzzled look explain.

"That's not his usual behavior at a party so I presume his punishment isn't over yet. If I had to take a guess, she's taken away his right to be considered a normal person, so for the day, he's just a thing to her, and everyone else should respect her choice of punishment."

Bella nods absentmindedly, then looks back to me.

"You know, I don't think I'll ever quite understand this whole Total Power Exchange, 24/7 thing. Good for them that it works so well, but I think I would go insane if you'd ignore me like that for even an hour."

It's interesting that it's this part she mentions and not the humiliation of being treated like an object or possession, but I know that she's come a long way from the days where she has been making a face when I've called her names.

Beth clapping her hands draws my attention to her, and at her loud holler for everyone to please join her in the playroom, we follow the throng of people going back inside. Bella leans into me when I stop her a little back and to the side for the dais, my arms crossed over her stomach as I hug her close. Public displays of affection and possessiveness like that are allowed, while Beth would likely kick me out if I attempted to do more than that to Bella outside of a designated scene. Masturbation, even mutual, is highly frowned upon at our parties.

"Welcome everyone again," Beth draws all attention to her where she's standing. "It's so good to see so many familiar faces, and a few new ones, here today. Before we proceed, may I quickly point out a few very important things again for after our demonstration Peter and Charlotte have prepared."

She nods in their direction before she went on.

"As always, if you have any questions, feel free to ask me or anyone who looks remotely in charge."

A few snickers and chuckles answer her joke.

"You'll find drinks and snacks outside, please keep them there and don't bring them into the playroom proper. After the demonstration please use the room outside for normal socializing and talk, we'll need most of the floor space here for your own enjoyment, be it of a passive or active kind. Goes without saying that I expect everyone to be respectful and friendly - don't go anywhere you're not invited, that also means unhelpful comments.

Remember, what might be your light play is someone else's limit, and vice versa. As far as I know no one wants to do anything more edgy, but if you change your mind, please tell me so we can make sure not to accidentally alienate someone. Now please enjoy yourselves!"

While Beth lets Peter help her off the stage - the tight lower part of her skirt making stepping down a little difficult - Bella turns to me, looking at me questioningly.

"More edgy?"

"Fire, blood play, suffocation, things like that."

Her mouth forms a small 'o' momentarily.

"People don't usually do things like that here then?"

I can see the unspoken question about what she knows I did with Chelsea, and I shake my head.

"No, not without informing everyone first. Usually parties like this are more a hook-up occasion to plan anything more out of the ordinary in a more private setting with a few people to help and assist." When she keeps eyeing me askance I shrug. "You generally don't whip anyone bloody without someone standing at attention with a first aid kit and 911 on speed dial. Better safe than sorry, right?"

I can't quite judge the look on her face, but after a moment she raises herself onto her toes to kiss me, a surprisingly deep kiss for the topic we're discussing.

"Sorry I ever doubted you."

Her words surprise me.

"What do you mean?"

"About that sub of yours Jazz told me about. I should never have doubted you. I know you're responsible, and you never once did anything to warrant my mind running rampant."

I kiss her in a ways of saying thank you, then add, "Well, that and Beth would have my ass in a way I wouldn't quite like so much, if that helps to further ease your mind."

Bella sighs but catches herself before she can add a scathing remark, but the look in her eyes is enough to make me consider adding a few more strokes to her tab for later. But then Peter starts

talking, and I turn my attention to him.

While Peter is busy tying his now naked wife up I feel Bella getting a little restless, and by the time Charlotte is restrained to the point where she can't move at all anymore, she's practically squirming, which in turn is a torture of its own on my hard cock pressed into her ass. I even consider taking her into the restroom outside to relieve some tension but figure that if it's hard on me to hold back, it must be twice as bad for her. I still stroke her arms gently, letting her imagine me touching her like that on a more erogenous zone, and Bella whimpers softly.

"Don't worry, we'll get to have some fun soon."

Not too soon, I hope, to keep things interesting for a while longer.

A short while later Peter is satisfied with his work, but keeps Charlotte all tied up while he replies to the questions that are posed. I can tell that Bella gets increasingly more antsy so I stop stroking her, but as keyed up as she is that doesn't change things a lot. When no further questions are being asked Beth steps in front of the dais while Peter starts untying Charlotte again.

"Okay, listen guys, for anyone not having caught on yet, we're using two different safeword systems - the usual green / yellow / red, and our own personal dungeon safeword is "applesauce". Hope everyone got that? If you hear someone use either safeword, make sure they're okay. Lube, condoms, disposable gloves are ready at the door if you forgot to bring your own. Play it safe and have fun!"

I grin at Beth's speech, knowing the familiar words by heart still. Leaning down to Bella I whisper a low, "Do you think we'll need any of those?" into her ear.

She stiffens slightly, and I hear her utter a low whine along with her next breath.

"I guess that fully depends on what you intend to do with me, Master."

Her words remind me again that I can't just bend her over the next hard surface and fuck her into oblivion, although I'm sorely tempted to try, but for once, I have to behave. What a concept.

Beth makes her round through the now slowly dispersing crowd, telling everyone who has had any special requests when and where they can set up shop. When I see her angling towards us, I press a quick kiss onto Bella's cheek and nudge her towards the exit.

"I need to talk to Beth, wait for me outside. And don't get into any trouble."

Bella nods and walks into the other room, her ass swaying way too suggestively for my own good. Beth looks after her for a moment before she turns to me.

"I scheduled you for after Patty and Angelo are done, is that okay with you?"

He promised it wouldn't take him more than forty-five minutes tops. I hope you can take that long?"

"Actually that's perfect," I reply, although I feel my cock and blue balls protesting loudly. Beth raises

a knowing eyebrow and I grin at her until she shrugs.

"Guess something always sticks, eh?"

I briefly incline my head, then catch her gaze once more.

"Actually, do you have time to lend me a hand? Only if you can spare a few minutes of course."

She's considering my offer, then shrugs.

"We'll see. I saw you ask around earlier, so I guess you won't miss me if I can't make it?"

"I always miss you," I assure her, and it's not entirely a joke. Beth answers my smile with a rueful one of her own, then nods her head towards the front room. "Had to cut you free, smart-ass, you were getting too bossy for your own good. Now go look after your girl before she sneaks off somewhere and decides that calling the worst down on herself for taking things into her own hands is a definitely worth it. And keep your hands to yourself, I'm watching you, Edward."

I nod, making her laugh at my fake attempt at demureness, then heed her words and track Bella down. I find her near the drinks, sipping on a cup of water with a second one in her other hand. When she sees me she smiles at me and starts making her way over to me, but before she gets there Raven is suddenly right in front of me.

At the door I've done a good job not actually looking at her, but here with the better lighting I cannot *not* glance at her outfit. Tall and willowy, the short, black dress she's wearing is accentuating her figure nicely, emphasizing her ass and long legs. I'm surprised she actually dared to shed her usual gothy attire except for the dramatic makeup and hairdo, and for just a moment I contemplate whether she really wants to give things a try. But then she opens her mouth and what she says annoys me too much to give a shit anymore.

"Mas-, ah, Edward, I was actually looking for you. I was hoping that you'd maybe have a little time for me?"

I regard her levelly, hoping that my unfriendly look conveys my answer before I have to open my mouth, but she is clearly immune to the hint.

"Raven, which part of me being here with my sub did you not get?"

She shrugs, then her eyes flicker to where Bella appears at my elbow, her face well composed but her eyes livid. I take the offered cup from her with a thankful smile, then turn back to Raven.

"Why don't you go look for someone else? I'm sure there are a lot of people here who are looking into hooking up with someone, or ask Beth if she knows if anyone's interested in playing with a novice."

My rebuke seems to be too subtle as she's still sticking around.

"I'm not a novice," she smiles, then actually has the gall to look down her nose at Bella. "If you're

looking to do something more challenging, I'm certainly up for it."

I seriously doubt that, but before I can answer, Bella interrupts me.

"We'll get back to you should the need ever arise, thank you for your offer."

Unlike anything I've ever said Bella's words cut right through Raven's simpering, and she narrows her eyes at the smaller woman at my side.

"Who asked you for your opinion?"

"I figured you were as you were so blatantly trying to whore yourself out to my man?"

While her tone is still light I don't miss the steel lacing Bella's voice, and for a moment the mental image of both of them wrestling - oddly enough inside a kiddie pool filled with pudding - comes up in my mind. I have no doubt who would win, though.

Raven looks from her to me, then back to Bella, clearly at a loss for words.

"And there I thought you were at least pretending to be submissive. Guess there's not much more to it than your slutty getup."

Bella is about to lose it, but then calms down all of a sudden, her level stare remaining on Raven.

"I'm not here to impress you. It was nice talking to you."

Her dismissal is more final than anything I could have offered, judging from the way Raven glares at first Bella, then me, before she turns around and stalks off. I don't know whether to shake my head in wonder or laugh, but when I look back to Bella I barely catch the hurt look in her eyes before she averts them, her face resuming a rather unfamiliar mask of meekness. I'm a little at a loss for what to say, unaccustomed of having anyone squabble over me, but Bella quickly tides over the stretching moment of silence.

"Shall I fetch you something to eat, Master?"

Suddenly the appellation grates along my spine but I don't know how to respond so I just nod, actually glad she scurries off. Thankfully Raven doesn't use the chance to track back, and I have a merciful two minutes to myself to come up with something to say before Bella returns.

The way she's squaring her shoulders when she hands me a tuna sandwich on a napkin I can tell she's still upset, but I have no idea if it's about Raven alone, or my apparent inability to make that woman see reason. The last thing I want for today is to emotionally upset Bella so I choose to wait until she speaks up. Even though she appears to be in the mood to be less outspoken than usual, I know she will eventually tell me if it really bothers her.

Five minutes later she does.

"Sorry I'm bumbling through this so much, but can we, I don't know, take a quick time-out so you don't have to flay me alive for what I really need to say right now?"

I nod, then gently take her arm and nudge her along until we're no longer in the midst of the people idling around to lend us a minimum of privacy.

"Sure. And if you don't want to play after that I understand -"

"Hell, no! I'm so not gonna let that skinny bitch ruin this for me today! For us, I mean."

Bella actually grins sheepishly up at me, and I have to staunch the relieved sigh that wants to wrench itself from my lungs.

"So, speak up then so we can move on with this, okay?"

She inclines her head, then exhales forcefully.

"Why can't you just tell her no, you won't play with her?"

"I've tried before, but she seems to be immune to me -"

"No, Edward, she's immune to half-assed comments that leave enough room for interpretation. Just say no. Tell her you already have all the tits and cunt you could ask for and leave it at that."

She makes it seem so easy, and I have to admit, it probably is.

"Okay, yes, you're right, I should have said that from the start. And I will if she tries again. Promise."

I want to add that I hope she's not mad at me now but Bella doesn't seem to be in the mood to let this conversation go on, because when she turns to me she does that delectable lip biting thing that she knows is driving me wild.

"But, you know, maybe she did have a point, although I'm sure she didn't mean it."

"Come again?"

Her eyes narrow at me as she studies my face.

"Do me a favor, please?"

"Everything you want."

"Whatever you've planned for today - double it."

I raise my brows at that, and Bella shrugs.

"I just don't want to feel like you're treating me with kid gloves. I'm a big girl, I can take it, as long as it's not too much more than stuff we've done before."

"Trust me, I didn't plan to go easy on you in the first place."

"Then don't. Please. Okay?"

I wonder for a moment if she's really serious, then inwardly smack myself for hesitating. Who in their right mind would pass up a chance like that? If she wants to serve herself on a platter, I'm more than happy to oblige her.

Some of the devious glee rising up in me must have shown on my face because Bella pales a little, but her smile is sincere when she leans closer and brushes her lips again mine.

"So we have a deal?"

"We do." I let her kiss me for a moment, then wrap her long hair around my hand and wrench her head backwards away from me while I smirk down at her. The way her pupils dilate and her breath catches noisily in her throat I can tell that she's getting all hot and bothered again, just the way I need her to be.

"Now lets get back inside, shall we? I might need to get a little inspired if you really want me to go all mean on your cute ass."

Ignoring that last straw to weasel out of the trap she laid out herself, Bella smiles up at me, then nods even though the motion must be pulling hard on her roots.

"I'd love to, Master."

And off we go back into the playroom, my cock already hard all over again, while Bella looks positively radiant with excitement. Can't wait to test one of my theories why I think she has been so ready to agree to coming her in the first place, very soon.

Chapter 16

Nothing like the scent of leather, sweat, and lube to get me hard, add a sprinkle of the sounds of flesh meeting flesh and a few high pitched moans and I'm in heaven. The only thing better than that is actually being the one to cause all those sensory assaults, on my lovely Bella no less.

And in a few minutes I'll finally get the chance.

Mingling with the crowd that makes up the audience for the first few scenes of the party taking place is fun, though, more so than I remember as watching Bella react to what's going on is fast becoming my new favorite pastime. Being a woman, and naturally polite, she's not one to openly react too obviously to anything even if it's a huge turn-on for her, but I know her well enough to read the signs. And the way she keeps rubbing her thighs together and her rock hard nipples straining against the sheer fabric of her top are a dead giveaway, too.

I'm more than happy that she's obviously responding well to the scene taking place on the center stage where she'll soon be finding herself. I have to admit, the way Angelo has his sub Patty tied to the St. Andrew's Cross is most appealing, leaving her arms and legs spread wide, her ass rubbing against the wood whenever he hits her with the single tail. I know Bella is still a bit apprehensive about whips in general, which is probably my own fault, but I feel like her unease is slowly ebbing away. At least if the way she's licking her lips whenever Patty moans loudly is any indication.

There is one other couple and a group of a Domme with her two subs, one of them clearly still in training and mostly kneeling at the side, eagerly waiting to be included, who have set up their scenes at the other side of the room, leaving enough space for everyone to move between the scene spaces without actually intruding. As usual the crowd is as diverse as it gets, both in gender, degree of dedication to portray their kinks, and what they intend to actually participate in today. I know Beth has set up Patty and Angelo as the first to occupy the larger space because their scene pretty much sets a good baseline example - some nice, not too heavy whipping that will, if I still know them well enough, end with him making her come on his hand but no intercourse.

Their scene will hopefully inspire everyone to actually have fun without feeling like they have to outdo each other, or like they have to fuck like porn stars on E. I know that most people don't have sex on a play party, at least not to the extent they do in their own playrooms. I still intend to be the exception, as usual, as fucking my partner, or being fucked by them, is simply part of the game. Nothing wrong with that, but not everyone sees it this way.

A few minutes later their scene ends just as I have guessed, and after Angelo is done with some preliminary aftercare the usual friendly banter and comments ensue. Bella seems a little intimidated by that but I quickly assure her that no one is going to judge what's going on, but like with any passionate hobby people just love to gossip. Once the crowd slowly disperses to give the now happy and spent couple some reprieve and privacy I leave Bella waiting to the side while I help Angelo clean up and together we heave the spanking bench up onto the dais. Bella watches us curiously while she's talking to Patty, who has wrapped herself in a blanket to keep from freezing. Whatever she says to Bella makes her blush furiously but also crack up with laughter, and Angelo wishes me lots of fun

before he joins his sub to in turn watch us play.

A small audience is quickly re-forming while I rub down the bench with disinfectant and bring my bag over to the side of the stage. Slipping off my shoes and socks I quickly get rid of my shirt, instantly feeling a little more like I belong here in my usual 'work clothes' - my leather pants. I can tell that Bella is a little uncomfortable being left standing alone up there but she doesn't seem too worried. She's definitely still excited when I'm finally done and beckon her to come to me, turning her around so that her back is to the room and she has only me to focus on.

"You know your safewords?"

She nods, and at my raised eyebrow adds a quick "Yes, Master."

"You won't hesitate to use them if you need them?"

"No, Master."

"Good. Now let's get started, shall we?"

I still take the time for a last long kiss before I bend down to fetch the padded leather cuffs, a move that I know will irk some of the people present in the audience - but quite frankly, my scene, my right to kiss my sub as long and as much as I want to. I understand why some people feel the need to exclude any kind of romantic feelings from their scenes, or from their BDSM life entirely, but as we're a couple in all aspects, I'm not afraid to show it.

I send Bella scurrying towards the bench with a quick slap on her ass, and she climbs onto the thickly padded piece of furniture. It's basically like a saw horse with a wide top part about 12 x 20 inches of size with two lower, smaller platforms for the sub to put their knees on, leaving their ass high and very available. Her skirt rides up and leaves her ass cheeks fully exposed once she is kneeling on the bench, and I set to buckling the cuffs around her wrists. There are several places I could secure her arms to but I decide to leave her kneeling there with her lower arms supporting her upper body instead of making her lie down fully. A short length of rope and the cuffs are attached to the front of the bench, leaving me with my victim waiting for me a little more helpless than before.

Her eyes are wide and she's trembling slightly, I'm sure because she knows everyone is watching her. I trust her that she will back out of this if she can't take it anymore so I try to disregard the natural urge to make sure again. I know myself that nothing is more pesky for a nervous sub than an overtly protective Dom, so I walk up to her hindquarters and let my hand roam boldly over her ass, pushing the skirt up all the way before I undo the tie and remove it completely. Her ass flares nicely below where the corset is cinching her waist, and if I hadn't decided before, the sight is enough to make me swear to only fuck her from behind when she's wearing a corset from now on.

The two light swats I direct at her ass turn her occasional shudder more violent but at the same time she seems to calm down as her mind lets her slip deeper into her role. I don't even have to look, I know she's dripping wet by the faint scent hanging in the air, but I still slide two fingers downwards and between her swollen labia. She groans softly when I brush her clit, while the six hard slaps that

follow make her arch her back for a moment.

I step away from her again and briefly cast a glance into the audience, then dismiss them entirely. To me it's the same if I'm here alone or with twenty people watching, years of scening with an audience have dulled my sensibilities, and I guess I didn't care that much to start with. Bella needs my attention right then, and I can see how much being watched still affects her. Normally she would have relaxed by now but it seems that won't happen here today.

Probably because she keeps glancing back at them, even though I've positioned her in a way that she has to crane her neck to see most of the onlookers.

"Eyes straight forward, I haven't allowed you to look around," I command, and my words make her jump. For a moment I wonder if this is really a bad idea and I should stop now, but then she calms and keeps her head slightly lowered and unmoving, so I decide to go on. Maybe I just need to distract her more.

Rubbing her barely reddening skin I admire her ass for a while, letting my caress comfort her, before I reach towards my bag again. I select the light riding crop I've brought, then trail the small paddle at the end of it over her thigh before I tap it a little harder against her pussy. That never fails to do the trick, and after about a minute or so the first moan leaves her, making me grin, which she of course can't see as she's still keeping her eyes forward only.

I change my tactics a little then, using the length of the toy to crop her ass, painting light, red lines all over her butt and thighs. They fade before I can hit her again and don't really hurt her, but the steady rhythm should help her along. That, and I simply love swatting away at her behind without having to care much about the consequences.

A few minutes later I tire of this, and when I stop and don't move I see Bella tense up - and we're back to where we've started off. I've had nervous subs before but I didn't care so much about what I put them through as I do with Bella now - simply because I want this to be as much fun for her as it is for me.

I switch tactics and instead of distracting her with light pain I go for more intense pleasure. She gasps when I slip two fingers into her pussy, and I'm surprised just how tight she is, her body about ready to seize up - and not in the way I want her to. A little finger fucking and rubbing her clit later she's still all wound up, but by now her thighs are sticky with her own juices, and I don't think she would appreciate me offering her to stop. So I decide to step it up a little more.

Rummaging around in my bag I find a thin rope - actually a piece of climbing rope - and use it to gather Bella's hair into a messy ponytail, tying it securely enough to make sure it can't slip. Leaving the rope there for now, I reach into the bag again and get out something Bella hasn't seen nor experience yet - a stainless steel anal hook. The curved, smooth metal is barely thicker than my little finger, and the rope attachment ring at the non-business end is exactly what I need now.

I thoroughly lube up the hook and without further ado start pushing the sleek, edge-less toy into her. Bella squeaks when she feels the cold hard *something* intrude and goes completely still, giving me

ample opportunity to tug her head back by the rope which I tie securely to the hook. This way she has to keep her head held high but unmoving to keep the pressure of the unyielding metal in her rectum to a minimum, her back now curved downwards to minimize the distance between her ass and head.

I admire the sight, then walk around to where she can see me, smirking down at her. Her eyes are open wide and she's swallowing repeatedly, unease knitting her brows together. When she sees me her gaze turns pleading but no sound escapes her, at least until I playfully pluck on the rope, jarring the inside of her ass. I love the strangled cry she lets out, her discomfort so evident.

"Felt that, did you?" I taunt, then pluck at the rope once more to underline my words. She squirms in response but remains silent, only at a much harder slap on her ass opens her mouth again.

"Yes, Master."

I give a curt nod, then pick up the crop again. Bella yelps when I don't hit her ass but bring it underneath her body, whacking the front of her thighs and the underside of her breasts. She intuitively arches her back to escape the assault, which in turn adds a lot of pressure on her hair and the steel hook in her ass. Seeing her struggle to find a middle way highly amuses me, and I decide to make it even worse for her.

Bella's eyes flutter shut when she feels my hands on her breasts, and she doesn't even flinch when I pinch her nipples after pulling the sheer top down so that her tits are hanging free now. Then she feels the bite of the nipple clamps in her puckered up flesh, and for a moment I see her grin at the wall in front of her - I think my girl just caught on to my devious plan of distracting her. Then she lets herself be swept away by the small wave of pain, and her eyes are open, pleading for mercy.

Which I'm disinclined to grant, of course.

Turning to our audience, I slap Bella playfully on her inviting ass cheek, the impact charring her enough to groan softly, before I decide to add insult to injury.

"Your ass is still sore from yesterday, isn't it?"

After a brief moment of silence that I ignore for now comes her answer.

"Yes, Master."

"And why is it sore?"

"Because you spanked me, Master."

"Only spanked you?"

A loud hiss follows as I slap her again, harder this time, but she's quick to answer now.

"You had to punish me, Master."

"What did you do?"

I glance down at her face, seeing a steep blush spread all over her cheeks, but I don't even consider relenting.

"I tried to manipulate you."

Of course no one thinks that's outrageous - but Bella still cringes while forming the words, the movement, subtle as it is, once again pulling on the hook.

"You did. And what was the first thing you did when we got here?"

Her intake of breath is loud, and the way she starts to blink furiously I wonder for a moment if she's crying with shame. Her voice is steady, though, when she answers.

"I was disrespectful and rude, Master. You said you would punish me again now."

I nod, even though I know she can't see it.

"Punish you how?"

"Twenty with whatever you decide, Master."

I'm a little exasperated when I see some of the resident Doms smirk at the low number, but I count on Bella to prove them wrong with her next reply.

"I feel gracious right now, I'll let you chose the implement. What do you say?"

She hesitates, or maybe she just needs a few moments to find the mental strength to answer.

"The cane, please."

Charlotte cringes where she and Peter are standing together with Patty and Angelo, and I see a few choice looks getting exchanged. I'm quite satisfied with Bella's answer and rub her ass reassuringly.

Bella inadvertently tenses up when she hears me go for the toy bag again, but this time it's her usual reaction, not the deer caught in the headlights fright from before. Her cheeks are still a deep red color that I hope will copy well to her hindquarters - but that's my job, after all.

I pick up the medium thick polymer fiber cane I've packed, and briefly weigh it in my hand to get a better feel for it.

"Warm-up first," I inform the dear victim of my undivided attention, then rain a few strokes down across the fleshiest part of my ass before I let my aim wander. My cock gets uncomfortably hard while I see her react to each and every hit, wriggling as little as she can while a sweet cacophony of groans, hisses and gasps leaves her. Knowing her the intrusion in her ass, though constant, is soon the least of her problems, and as I increase the force behind my strokes, so does the volume of her

involuntary utterances.

Even though it's not part of her punishment I also pay attention to her soft tits, making them jiggle enticingly. I see her hands ball into fists, then open and close fast to bleed off some of the tension, but I keep going until she pretty much yelps continuously. The strokes are too soft to leave marks but I'm sure her tits hurt like hell now.

When I finally turn my attention back to her ass I glance into the audience, quite satisfied to see most of the condescension from before gone. Yes, Bella is new to the scene compared to most of them, but she knows how to take what I dish out. For a moment I wish she could see how Raven has gone all pale in the face, but then figure Bella will prefer having this behind her rather than a spark of superfluous satisfaction now.

I want to make the twenty strokes count without completely unbalancing her, so instead of going right for it I rub my fingers between her slick labia, then thrust three of them hard into her cunt. Her back arches and I can actually feel the hook through the wall of her pussy. There is nothing gentle about what I'm doing but I feel her push back at me almost instantly, grasping for any kind of pleasure she can get like a drowning woman going for the proverbial straw. I'm sure she's very aware just how her display of open wantonness must seem to everyone but the fact that she still does it makes my cock grow even harder.

The sloppy sound of my fingers finally withdrawing seems loud to me, and I make a show of wiping them clean on her already red ass. Then I switch the cane into my left hand, figuring it's just as well that literally the hand that has just given her pleasure will now deal her pain.

"Count, out loud."

I barely wait until my words have registered, then bring the cane down hard five times, making it impossible for her to obey. Her loud sob is heart-wrenching, but when I slow down her surprisingly strong voice quickly picks up counting.

"One, Master! Two, Master!" and so on, and when I stop for a moment at ten she actually adds a much weaker, "thank you for punishing me!" that nearly warms my heart. I still don't leave her much time to catch her breath, and have the joy of administering the hardest three hits twice. I'm sure at least two of them will bruise, which is as much a reason for me to rejoice as the fact that even with difficulty she hasn't faltered. I'm proud of her, and I know several of the people in the audience envy me now, either way.

While clearly relieved that her punishment is over, Bella doesn't look very happy. Tears and snot stain her face, and a few violent shudders rake her while she tries to calm down again. Picking up a tissue I take care of the mess around her nose and on her cheeks, her smudged makeup only adding to the appeal.

Now on to the fun part.

Remaining in front of her I look down at her until she tilts her head back further, her wide, somewhat

clouded eyes staring up at me. I stroke her cheek softly, then let my smile turn wry.

"Don't you want to thank me?"

I see her swallow, probably in anticipation of more pain to come, but she's quick to answer, her voice slightly hoarse.

"Thank you for punishing me, Master. Thank you for putting up with me."

I see a few grins appear in the audience at the last part, convinced they'd more than gladly 'put up' with her, but I don't let her see my obvious satisfaction.

"I meant thank me properly."

She blinks a little stupidly, then her eyes zero in on the bulge at my crotch.

"Please let me suck your cock so I can show you my gratitude?"

"As you asked so sweetly, how can I decline?" I tease, then unzip my pants and carefully extract my hard dick and aching balls without shoving the leather down any farther. It's a little uncomfortable but with luck that will just make me last longer, and I forget quickly when Bella's lips wrap tightly around my erection.

I let her do all the work, simply because that means she is fucking herself with the hook with every motion of her head, and let myself enjoy the divine sensation of her mouth working on me. The sight of her bright red ass beyond the tight corset is nearly too much for me, so after a minute I do my best to shut the assault on my pleasure center out as much as I'm able to.

Without a word to tip Bella off too soon I catch Peter's gaze, then nod at him to invite him over. I think that Bella would have remained oblivious even if he'd stomped over, but he's silent as he bends down over the wide open bag and selects one of the toys I've stealthily set up there. I'm not surprised that he chooses a blue dildo instead of one of the impact toys -

after all he's been in the game long enough to know that distracted by pain as she already is, more of the same would just douse Bella's need instead of fan it on.

Even without looking I can tell the exact moment he slides it into her dripping cunt as Bella goes very still. Her eyes are the first thing that moves, rolling up until she's looking into my face. Surprise is painted on her flushed face but her gaze is heavy, loaded, full of lust and, I'm glad to realize, appreciation.

I'm certain I know where her mind is right now - back in the kitchen of my old house. I know she doesn't regret a thing - and I'm surprised to realize, neither do I. Talk about sexual healing.

Dragging my thoughts back to the here and now I gently but insistingly push my hips forward to nudge Bella into action again, and without hesitation she resumes sucking me off. Peter meanwhile fucks her slowly with the dildo while his free hand is rubbing her burning ass, no doubt taking a little of the

sting away. Soon he steps away from her again, leaving the toy deep inside of her, and he nods his thanks at me as he resumes his previous place at his wife's side.

One after the other the people I've talked to before come over to us, taking their turn having a little fun with my helpless sub. She squirms her way through whatever they dish out, be it a few slaps over her swollen pussy lips or a minute of thorough fucking with one toy or another, and while the angry red on her ass slowly fades, her cheeks remain a deep scarlet. She still moans and pushes back at whatever is done to her. I'm nearly glad when her efforts to make me orgasm decrease rapidly as the minutes pass, leaving me with just enough stamina for the end.

Beth is the last to join me on the dais, her lips curled into a radiant smile.

Still looking at me she steps close to Bella's ass, then leans over her, grabbing her tits for a moment before she starts talking in a low voice, more or less for Bella's ears only.

"You are a very beautiful and graceful woman, Bella."

She stops, the moment of silence interrupted by Bella's loud mewl caused by Beth taking the clamp off her left nipple.

"You are a wonderful submissive, and I'm certain Edward appreciates you with every fiber of his being."

The other clamps comes off, and being prepared Bella only stiffens, her shoulders shaking for a few seconds. Looking up at me Beth keeps smiling while her fingers roll Bella's aching nipples deftly, causing her to emit a low cadence of moans.

Then Beth straightens and takes a step away, and I can see Bella already relax, oblivious of Beth bending down to take the cane into her hand. At her brief nod I step away, letting my wet cock slide from between Bella's lips, but keeping my hands on her shoulders.

There is no warning, and I'm sure Beth hits her completely unawares.

Bringing the cane down hard across the soles of Bella's feet five times Beth concludes the small impromptu ritual- I like to think of it as Bella's initiation into our circle. I would never have let anyone really play with her without asking her consent, but I know, eventually she'll thank me - but probably not for the next few days.

Beth is quick enough that Bella is still gasping for breath when she drops the cane back into the bag.

"Welcome," she states, smirking, the last syllable drowned out when my poor girl finally gets enough air into her lungs to let out an ear splitting scream that slowly gives way to a rather emphatic string of obscenities, her toes curling up in a senseless attempt to protect her feet.

I cock one eyebrow at Beth, not exactly surprised that she went there but feeling like I have to ask. She shrugs nonchalantly, meeting my gaze head-on.

"It wasn't on her hard limits, so there."

Shaking my head at her quoting my previous defense back at me I dismiss her and turn back to my still cursing, writhing girl, and quickly shove my cock deep into her cunt. Bella shuts up immediately with a low keening sound, the muscles of her pussy squeezing me hard.

And then I'm fucking her, hard, fast, without pretense of it being anything else than just that. I'm highly amused to see that she's actually lowering her head, forcing the hook in her ass deeper into her while I pound into her other hole.

Even before I can reach my climax Bella starts to beg me to let her come, her words so jumbled that I don't really understand them, but the meaning is clear. Slapping her ass hard twice I tell her to wait until I finish, but as that actually happens no five thrusts later it's kind of redundant.

I let myself sag down against her quivering, bucking body, keeping her pinned with my weight alone while my lips hungrily cover the sweet spot on her neck. I wrap my arms around her and hold her until she starts coming down from her high, then continue to calm her down by whispering sweet nothings into her ear. I'm so fucking proud of her my chest feels ready to burst, and I smile when I hear her laugh softly.

Once I'm sure she won't fall right off the bench when I let go of her I move away and with gentle motions loosen the rope entangled in her hair so I can extract the hook without causing her any more discomfort. Bella remains slumped on her bench even after I have unbuckled the cuffs, reduced to a sweaty, hurting, but altogether satisfied mess. I leave her kneeling there while I keep stroking her back above the corset, smiling at and thanking everyone for the compliments we both get from the slowly dispersing audience. Seeing Raven turn away with a shudder I'm sure that issue has finally resolved itself, too.

Eventually Bella pushes herself into a more upright position and I help her off the bench, holding her close while she stretches her stiff legs, her stance uneasy as she keeps shifting her weight from one hurting foot to the next. I know her ass must be a lot worse so I pay attention not to touch it unless I have to when I lead her down from the dais. Beth is already waiting with a cup of hot chocolate at the playroom door, making Bella laugh. I leave her in Beth's care while I quickly clean up and pack up all my stuff, then join my exhausted but still smiling sub outside where she has taken residence on one of the easy chairs.

Although her knees must be aching she is happy to straddle me when I pick her up to sit down underneath her, leaving her ass exposed so I can run my hands over her hot skin. Bella groans but still leans into my touch, while her nails bite into my naked shoulders.

"I guess I can leave you two lovebirds here unattended?" Beth chimes in, then stays until Bella has not only nodded but assured her that she's okay.

Her voice is still a little shaky, but I'm happy to see that she's taking everything more or less in stride.

I'm burning to ask her about our scene but force myself to stay silent as long as she doesn't breach the

subject, instead offering her all the physical comfort I'm able to. It's still amusing to observe that she has apparently lost her previous jumpiness caused by being naked, definitely a good thing.

"Have I told you of late that I love you for being such a mean bastard?" she finally speaks up, painting a broad grin onto my face.

"Can't say that often enough."

She laughs as I kiss her softly, letting that be my reassurance in turn. Bella seems unfamiliarly needy but maybe that's just because normally we would be laying in bed together, while now people are chatting all around us. Not that I protest, if she'd let me I would be all over her all the time.

When she pulls away for good and comes to her feet she gingerly rubs her ass, then tries to twist and turn to get a good look at her aching behind.

There's no reproach in her eyes when she turns back to me, a playful grin lighting her face up.

"You know, you're all worse than any fraternity in the whole country when it comes to joining! Shit, I'm just happy you didn't tell me you had something like that planned or I don't think I would have shown up here today."

I chuckle under my breath, then clasp her hand in mine, following her when she draws me closer to the playroom doors.

"That's all part of it, trust me."

"So everyone goes through something like that?"

I shake my head, laughing.

"No, only those who know the wrong people. Or right, however you view it."

She rolls her eyes at me, then lets me gather her close for a long kiss.

Never letting go of my hand she leads me back into the playroom, her previous anxiety clearly replaced by curiosity.

We stay for another two hours or so, spending some time watching others play and chatting the rest of the early afternoon away. When we finally leave it's only after our mutual promise to call Beth next week, then she releases us back into the drab 'normal' world.

Back at home I run us a warm bath and spend the rest of the evening doting on Bella, to the point where she starts laughing at me whenever I ask her if she needs something. We retire to bed early to spend what feels like wonderful hours slowly making love, and I'm surprised that not once Bella takes the initiative from me. Usually after a really intense scene she's displaying a more dominant behavior, as if to take back some of the ground she has lost during play. Not so today, and I presume she's still partly soaring in sub space, content to just let me sweep her away.

I'm already about to drift off when I feel her stir next to me, and when I force my eyes to open again I find her gnawing on her lip.

"Something you want to tell me?" I gently nudge her.

She shrugs.

"More ask than tell. Although I have to admit that after today I'm more afraid to say this than I was in the morning."

"What about?"

She looks away for a moment, but when her gaze returns to mine it is heavy with lust and anticipation.

"I want to play again with you and Beth. I want you both to dominate me.

And I don't want to have more than the slightest clue of what you're going to do to me, but I hope you'll do a good job pushing my limits."

I just look at her for a moment, wondering if I've already fallen asleep and am just dreaming this, but then I realize that it's actually happening. Bella offering herself on a silver platter, asking me to do with her pretty much whatever I please, and expecting it to be a long shot from the slow progress we've been making over the past months.

I don't really need to think about my answer but still take a few more moments giving it, simply to show her how much I value her trust.

"I'll call her tomorrow. And Bella?"

"Hm?"

"I love you."

Bella smiles and leans over to kiss me, then snuggles up close against the length of my body. I gently stroke her back, then can't hold back and squeeze her ass one last time, making her grumble into my shoulder.

It takes me a lot longer than her to fall asleep, my mind alive with possibilities and forming scenarios. My lovely Bella may think she knows what she just signed herself up to, but I'm determined to pretty much overcome all her expectations.

Chapter 17

"Stop it right now, or I'm going to whack you a good one, Edward!"

Trying hard, but probably failing abysmally, to rein in my fingers drumming on the table top, I turn to grin at Beth.

"You can try, but I can't promise that you'll succeed."

"You're not that hard to hit, my dear boy," she jibes back.

"Not that," I laugh. "But I don't think you spanking me soundly will make me any less excited."

Her theatrical sigh only causes my grin to broaden, but I can see by the look on her face that she's not exasperated in a bad way. It's even possible that she's happy for me, although I must be getting on her nerves with my inability to calm down enough to actually seem composed.

But just the fact that I'm minutes away from going full out evil on my probably equally twitchy wonderful sub with my kinky mentor as a sidekick has me all kinds of hyped up.

I still make an effort to appear more composed as I wait for Beth to finish tugging her outfit in place. Today she is wearing a black latex bustier and matching miniskirt, both with red decorative lacing, and supportive boning for the top. No garters or stockings but black high heeled pumps, with her hair open and her fingernails and lips painted red, Beth is simply stunning, as she usually is. I feel a little underdressed in just my leather pants, but contrary to her I don't get off on feeling hot, sticky outfits confining me.

"Ready?" she finally asks, but instead of turning towards the playroom she snatches my left hand, checking my short clipped nails in turn.

"You know, it's not the first time I'm doing this," I grumble when she nods and lets go of me again, and of course I get a dirty look for that remark.

"I'm aware of that. But it's my dungeon, my rules, so suck it up already."

There's nothing I can add to that so I remain silent, and Beth finally approaches the closed door of her playroom. With her fingers wrapped around the handle she stops again, her sharp gaze scanning my face for a moment.

"You know what you're doing?"

"Yes."

"And you are absolutely sure she wants this and can handle everything we've planned?"

Irritation washes over the calm I've so valiantly forced myself to feel, and my answer is a little

sharper than I want it to be.

"Yes and yes. Do you have to keep undermining my ego with your repeat questions?"

I'm a little afraid she might be offended now, but Beth graces me with one of her rare small smiles.

"I never doubt you when you're confident like this. I was just making sure that *I* can go in there and fully enjoy myself with leaving *you* with all the responsibility. Call me a selfish bitch if you like."

The lilt of her voice makes me grin, and I shrug off the already receding annoyance.

"I told you weeks ago at the party already, I'm over my doubts. And Bella explicitly asked me to push her limits. So that's exactly what I'm going to do today. You know her list, feel free to improvise as much as you like within her defined boundaries."

With a quick nod Beth turns to the door, then opens it to let us both into the play room proper, where Bella is already waiting for us. Naked, kneeling on the floor, her palms turned up on her spread thighs with the ends of her long hair tickling the underside of her breast on the side she has swept it to.

I catch her eyes following our entry before she casts them down demurely, and decide that this is the last even slight transgression she's allowed today.

Bella thinks she's a big girl and wants to play with the grown-ups. I'm more than eager to let her find out if that's the truth, or if she's just gotten a little too cocky of late.

Beth's heels ring loud on the floor as she walks a circle around Bella, until she joins me where I've remained standing in front of her kneeling form, looking down at her as I admire her beautiful body barely moving with every breath she takes. Bella doesn't look up, her gaze remains trained on the floor somewhere between her knees and my feet, and she doesn't move even when none of us speaks for over a minute.

Sharing a quick glance with me Beth offers me a grin that speaks of similar excitement as I feel gripping my body, and I decide that we've kept Bella waiting long enough.

"Bella," I acknowledge her, then smile as I see the rise of her chest halt for a second as she catches her breath.

"Master," she replies quickly, her tone breathy but her voice strong.

"Are you ready?"

"For you, always."

Beth chuckles next to me, and I clench my hand for a moment to keep a similar if more evil sound from escaping me. Yes, I feel childish enough today to let out a comically evil laugh. We'll soon see just how ready my dear Bella really is, for me or otherwise.

"You know the rules for today?"

Bella nods, and when she doesn't hear me answer she replies in more detail.

"Yes, Master. I have my safewords and will use them should I need them. I have asked you to do with me whatever you wish, without reservation except for what I declared as my hard limits. I'm yours to use as you see fit."

Her words cause my pulse to pick up, and again I fight to keep any sounds of amusement down. I'm pretty sure she knows that we will push her, a lot.

What she probably doesn't know is that today is a test, in a way for both of us. For me, to see if I've judged her likes right and know how much is too much for her. And for Bella, because I need to know that her explicit trust and consent are something I can rely on.

I don't think either of us can fail today, but it will be interesting to see just how well we succeed.

"You know that you are here not for your own pleasure but for ours alone?"

"Yes, Master."

"You know that any transgression on your part will be punished swiftly and as harshly as your mishap calls for?"

She swallows hard but doesn't miss a beat in her answer.

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Don't disappoint me."

A quick nod is all she answers me with, which is just as well. At that Beth resumes circling Bella, and stops at her back to bend down to stage-whisper into her ear.

"For today, you will call me only by my name, for I'm not your Mistress, I'm just helping your Master. But don't expect any leniency from me because of that."

"Yes, Beth," comes the steady and quick reply, not even a note of hesitation in Bella's voice. Beth smiles in turn and squeezes Bella's upper arms for a moment, then steps away and nods at me.

We leave Bella kneeling on the floor where she is to fetch what we need to get things started. As much as I love my own playroom, I'm in awe of the collection of equipment Beth has amassed over the years, and intend to use some of it today. But for the warm-up I like things simple, so a few feet of rope will do.

Crouching down behind Bella I run my fingers up and down her spine for a moment, watching as a shiver runs through her body. She's nearly vibrating with tension, but today I don't even want to tease her. Much.

"Get up, and hands behind your head."

She follows my instructions promptly with lithe motions, and I set to work quickly. I start off with creating the chest harness we'll be centering all other restraints around. It's very basic bondage, just rope above and below her breasts wound around her torso several times, the tie completed with more rope to secure the two 'bands' between her breasts and at her sides to add some restriction to her tits but mostly to give us a well fitting and secure anchoring point at her back, once the ties are completed with the rope tied over her shoulders and behind her back. More rope follows around her wrists which I draw back to the central anchoring point of the harness between her shoulder blades, leaving her already halfway helpless and completely at our mercy.

Stepping closer to her until her bound hands are pressed against my chest I snake my arms around her hips, letting my mouth and tongue explore her neck hungrily. Beth meanwhile approaches Bella from the front, and when my hand snakes between Bella's legs, Beth grabs her nipples and twists them hard, causing her to elicit the sweetest of gasps. She's already wet and squirms against my fingers immediately but I just skim her pussy lips, then slap her sex hard a few times until she lets out a first strangled cry.

Beth eases up on her first and lets go, but only so I can step back and drag Bella across the room, nearly making her lose her balance in turn. She only gets a moment to catch herself when I tie another length of rope to the center of her harness in back, then she is forced onto her tip toes when I hoist her body nearly off the floor with the pulley system the rope is connected to. Bella quickly steadies herself with her legs spread hip wide and her back as straight as she can manage, her eyes still downcast.

She's beautiful in her vulnerability, but I like her even more when she's unable to remain so still and composed, so I pick up one of the light floggers and set to work warming her up a little. Beth watches me from the side for a while as I paint red patches across Bella's ass, thighs, stomach and tits, before she grabs a flogger herself and helps me. We keep walking around our bound quarry, one working over her back as the other goes for her front, and soon we have Bella panting and covered in sweat all over.

Except for a few stray strokes I'm sure we haven't actually hit her hard enough to hurt her. Still, she's not used to only being flogged without any form of masturbation, and I can tell by her ragged breathing that she's already lost her calm.

We finally stop and I step aside to let Beth do the next part, letting her play with my sub alone for a while to help Bella ease further into the scene.

Stepping up to Bella's front Beth admires the irregular pattern of lightly reddened skin for a moment before she reaches up, lifting Bella's face with a single finger under her chin. Bella blinks twice before she locks gazes with Beth, painting a smile on the other woman's face.

Sure that she has her attention, Beth lets her hands skim over Bella's body until they stop at her chest, where her hands squeeze Bella's breasts deftly for a while. Almost immediately Bella's pants pick up, and she whines when Beth's fingers become a little too harsh.

"Don't you like me touching your tits?"

Bella shakes her head, then nods, clearly undecided how to answer the question. Beth cocks one eyebrow, then swats Bella's right tit hard enough to result in a loud smacking sound, and her reward is a harsh intake of breath.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" she surmises, then adds two more slaps, both at the exactly same spot. Bella cries out but tries to stifle the sound immediately, and the moment she has enough air in her lungs to answer, she does.

"I love you touching my tits!"

Beth smiles brightly and resumes massaging Bella's breasts roughly, drawing a few more gasps but also a moan or two from her.

"You like the pain, don't you?" she then goes on.

"Yes, Beth."

With her smile now reaching even her eyes, she switches her attention a little, and starts rolling Bella's nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

Bella's eyes drift close for a few seconds as she relaxes into the pleasurable sensation, but then snap open when Beth adds a few more hard slaps, this time to her other tit. A light laugh dances over Beth's lips then before she goes back to teasing with softer caresses.

"We're not out to cause you that much pain today, though," she resumes.

"If you behave yourself, you will be feeling pleasure for the most part. Mess up, and it's going to hurt."

At a light squeeze of her nipples Bella nods quickly. Beth smiles again, then lets one of her hands trail down until her fingers reach Bella's vagina.

A shaky exhale makes it obvious just when Beth's fingers push into Bella's cunt, adding to Beth's mirth.

Leaning a little closer she quickens the pace with which she squeezes her victim's breast, now matching the motions of both of her hands.

"Kiss me."

Bella looks a little confused and hesitates, and a second later Beth steps away from her, catching my gaze.

"More rope?"

I nod and fetch another coil, and at Beth's suggestion tie it around one of Bella's ankles. Drawing her foot up until her heel is flush with her ass I add the rest of the rope to the central harness point, now leaving Bella balancing precariously on the ball of one foot only, her thighs forced to stay open in turn.

As I step aside again Beth returns with a small paddle, and grabbing Bella's restrained ankle she brings the flexible leather down onto her exposed sole several times. Grunts quickly turn to cries, and when Beth finally relents I can see Bella bite her lip hard in what I know by now is her way of trying to compose herself again.

Interestingly enough, Bella hasn't set her feet as a hard limit even after the play party. She must have realized that we know it's one obvious weakness of hers, and I wonder briefly if she already regrets the decision.

Beth takes her time returning the paddle to one of the side tables, and walks back empty handed. She quickly resumes her previous position, one of her hands squeezing Bella's breast, the other cupping her pussy, and when she tells Bella to kiss her again, the other woman quickly complies.

It's not a chaste brush of lips, either, but a real and quite passionate kiss, messy with tongue and all. My dick grows hard as I watch them, and in another setting I might even have stroked myself, but I know Beth wouldn't approve. I feel a little sad when Bella breaks the kiss to come up for air, but Beth's nasty chuckle is very promising.

"Did I tell you to stop?"

Bella immediately looks alarmed and tries to remedy her mistake but Beth pulls away, her fingers now pinching Bella's nipple hard. Bella answers with a somewhat resigned sounding exhale, then grunts when she receives a hard slap on her breast again.

"I'm starting to wonder if you are so disobedient because you want to fail,"
she muses.

"No! Please, I promise, I didn't -"

Beth shuts her up with a finger across her lips, then moves both of her hands up to keep fondling Bella's tits almost viciously.

"Then you better make up for it now."

The moment she can reach Beth's lips again Bella is kissing her with new passion, which doesn't change even when Beth eases up and groping turns to gentler stroking. They keep this up for quite a while, and my cock jumps every time I hear either of them elicit a soft moan. Part of me still finds this a little disconcerting as I've never reacted that way to Beth, but the rest of my brain is all caught up in seeing two hot women clearly enjoy making out. As neither of them can read my mind I decide that I'm on the safe side.

When Beth finally lets go and steps away she leaves Bella quite breathless with a glazed look on her face. I immediately take her place but instead of concentrating my attention on Bella's breasts, lovely as they are, I resume thrusting first two, then three fingers into her pussy. She starts to squirm almost immediately, then pushes her hips forward against my hand, nearly losing her precarious balance that way. Grinning diabolically at her I reach around her body as if to steady her, but instead start working a finger of my other hand into her ass. I feel her clench around me for a few seconds before she relaxes enough to allow the intrusion to proceed, furthered even more when Beth helpfully squirts a generous amount of lube where it is needed.

Working together definitely has its benefits, at least for my devious plans, and no two minutes later I have Bella on the verge of coming. Her moans and breathy pleas are music in my ears as I keep finger fucking her, my lips and teeth hungry against the side of her neck. I finally relent and order her to come, and she does, shivers contorting her body as she lets herself go.

As I step away from her body I catch Bella's gaze before she can drop it, and barely hold in a chuckle at the shrewd suspicion I see plainly written on her face. She's obviously wondering why I've given in so early in the game and let her climax, when usually she has to endure a lot more until I finally allow her to come. Not that she's complaining, but she knows we're up to something.

The moment passes and then she's all meek if still panting heavily, her chest heaving a welcome sight. I step back up to her so she can lean against my body while Beth undoes some of the restraints, leaving Bella's limbs free but her torso still encased in rope.

Winding the hand that's still sticky with her juices into her hair I lead Bella across the room, maybe a bit roughly, but she follows suit. Over at the far wall of the room stands our destination, a padded bench-like piece of furniture that just begs to be used. The lower part is just like any padded bench but the back rest is reclineable at any chosen angle, and we have set it up against a part of the wall that is covered with attachment points for cuffs and rope alike. At a nod from me Bella scrambles up onto the bench and leans back against the more upright part, not protesting when I pull her ass flush with the edge until she's more lying than sitting.

While I grab some rope to attach to Bella's ankles Beth buckles soft padded leather cuffs around her wrists and secures them to the bench just above Bella's head, her raised arms pulling her tits up nicely. Bella is watching me with curiosity when I spread her legs and raise them so I can secure the other ends of the ropes to the wall behind her. That leaves her very open and vulnerable, and once again completely at our mercy.

Beth joins me where I stand between Bella's spread legs and grin down at her, and I can see the familiar mixture of apprehension and excitement flit over my lovely sub's face. We both smirk down at her until she starts squirming – uselessly, of course – in her bonds, before Beth turns to me.

"Shall I start or do you want to do the honors?"

I shrug, my eyes never leaving Bella's face.

"Why don't we let her decide whose hands she wants on her first?"

Bella looks panicked for a moment, convinced the question is a trap, which it is in a way, but not the kind she might expect. Her silence is heavy until she clears her throat, her eyes still darting from one of us to the other.

"I think I would like Beth to start, Master."

I nod, rather happy about her choice. Beth shares a meaningful glance with me before she walks off to fetch a cloth covered tray, its contents still hidden from Bella's view. In the meantime I ready a low swivel chair and table where Beth can place her needed paraphernalia, before I step away again to observe and enjoy. Bella's eyes follow me for a moment before she casts them down again, awaiting what's to come with as much calm as she can muster.

She still gives a start when she hears the telltale snap of latex gloves as Beth dons them, before she leans over Bella and lets her covered fingers run over Bella's tits once more. Concern quickly gives way to excitement when Beth continues what she has done before but without the kissing, until she leans back to retrieve a bunch of thick rubber bands from the still covered tray. Placing them on Bella's stomach Beth then grabs her right tit and starts pushing several of the bands up to the base, until the constricted fleshy globe sticks up invitingly from Bella's chest. Beth then continues to do the same with Bella's other breast until both of them are equally prepped, before she adds a last, thinner rubber band to Bella's nipples, drawing a few ragged pants from her as she winds the band tightly around it a few times.

Admiring her work for a moment Beth leans down to lick over the now obscenely erect nipples a few times before she sits down, leaving Bella to stew for a while so the restricting rubber bands can do their magic. Within minutes Bella's tits darken to a lovely pink hue, but the constriction isn't hard enough to be of any real concern as long as we watch it. Soon her breasts will start to ache, then become really sensitive, and apart from the very appealing visual effects that's what we're aiming for.

Once Beth is done letting Bella hang in anticipation she fully uncovers the tray, letting Bella catch a first glimpse at what will soon be used on her. I'm sure she knows what most of the 'instruments' are for, and I'm happy when instead of looking frightened Bella actually licks her lips.

Beth smirks up at her, then reaches for a black inflatable butt-plug, taking her time covering it with lube. My previous exploring has left Bella's sphincter spread enough that the plug slides into her with little resistance, although Beth plays a bit with Bella before she pushes the toy in fully. Bella squirms somewhat when she feels the plug extend inside of her as Beth pumps the small attached ball but doesn't give a sound, only her eyebrows knitting together.

Quickly exchanging the examination gloves for a fresh pair Beth then proceeds by rubbing Bella's labia down with disinfectant, and I can see that now Bella gets a little anxious. Even Beth's encouraging smile doesn't really calm her but she doesn't protest, only the muscles in her thighs show that she's tense as hell all of a sudden.

Her breath hitches again when Beth picks up the sleek stainless steel speculum and lubricates it before she turns back to her 'victim'. Bella squeals as the cool metal slides into her but she gradually relaxes again, even when Beth proceeds to open her up slowly. I'm sure that with the plug in her ass

Bella must feel rather full but she clearly enjoys it, her spread labia as puffy and swollen as before. She still shivers when Beth uses more disinfectant to rub down her pussy again, but seems much more composed now, if a little resigned.

Then Beth reaches for her next prop, and Bella lets out a rather succinct,

"Fuck!" under her breath.

Beth arches her eyebrow while a mean smile spreads in her face.

"I guess that means you know what this is?"

She wriggles the still sealed object between her fingers.

"A Foley catheter," comes Bella's deflated sounding reply, before her gaze skims over to me. I can see her trying to make up her mind if she should use her safeword or not, but after a few seconds she catches her lower lip between her teeth and looks down again, a silent consent for Beth to go on.

Beth still waits before she has Bella's undivided attention again before she goes on.

"I know that you have your hard limit at watersports, but I'm not going to make you drink your own piss or something. You don't do scat, either, but still like to be fucked up your ass, right?"

Bella nods, then exhales forcefully, before her whole body goes slack. Her look when she regards Beth is somewhat challenging, though, on the verge of breaking role, and I for one won't forget that for later.

"I guess that's what you're going to do now? Fuck my peehole?" she hedges.

Beth smirks as she tears open the packaging, daintily extricating the long, plastic tube.

"Many women, and men, just so you know, greatly enjoy urethral stimulation. And if I'm not completely mistaken, you're not too averse to this."

Keeping the catheter in one hand she then runs a finger lightly over where the spread speculum gives ready access to Bella's urethral opening, in turn drawing a barely cut-off moan from the other woman. Clearly satisfied with the reaction she has just elicited Beth reaches for a plastic syringe filled with sterile, medicine grade lube, and inserts the soft plastic tip where her finger has been probing moments before.

Bella doesn't even tense up when she feels some of the lube entering her, while even more of the gelatinous substance leaks out to pool around the opening. Once she is satisfied with starting the prep work Beth adds even more lube to the catheter tube. Her motions are slow and very gentle as she starts inserting the catheter, taking her time as she pays attention to Bella's reactions.

Of course I can't be sure but Bella doesn't seem to feel much pain, if any at all, but she keeps squirming which hinders Beth's motions a little. I can tell when the plastic tube finally reaches her

bladder as she utters a loud grunt, but Beth doesn't even stop for a moment. Getting a disposable bottle from the tray she pushes the other end of the catheter into it, then flips the switch that has kept any liquid contained inside the tube before.

A steep blush creeps over Bella's face and upper chest as the sound of her urine being expelled is the only thing audible inside the room except for her shallow breaths, but she doesn't even try to add any verbal protest. Only when Beth is done and with a quicker motion distracts the catheter Bella squeals, her cheeks even darker red when a few more drops trickle from the previously filled hole.

"Don't be such a prissy princess," Beth remarks dryly as she deposits the tube and closed bottle in the ready waste bin. Bella's head snaps up and she looks ready to balk, but when she meets Beth's gaze she thinks better of it. Closing her mouth again she lets her head loll back against the bench, while her eyes stare up at the ceiling.

I'm sure she still stealthily watches as Beth unzips the plastic case waiting on the tray, then dons fresh gloves once again before she retrieves one of the thinnest steel rods she has just unpacked. Holding the slightly curved rod up for Bella to examine, she goes on explaining while coating it with yet more of the sterile lube.

"This is called a sound. Never mind its intended use for urethral blockage therapy, I'm sure you'll soon be glad I've made sure that your bladder is comfortably empty of what you seem so embarrassed about."

Spreading the upper part of Bella's labia above the speculum she then starts to insert the sound into Bella's peehole, her motions now quick and short as she pushes the instrument in deeper, alternating with withdrawing it a little in turn. The sound she has chosen is one of the smallest, even thinner in diameter than the soft catheter tube has been, and Bella's discomfort should be mostly psychological, not physical. And sure enough she looks rather distressed before the sound is even halfway inserted, usually a sign that she doesn't want to admit that she likes something her mind keeps rejecting.

Beth is nothing if not persistent as she keeps fucking Bella gently with the steel rod, her motions slowly becoming surer and longer. After a while she withdraws the sound and places it back at the tray, smirking when she sees Bella's somewhat dismal expression.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not done with you for quite some time."

Picking up the next larger sound she resumes her ministrations with yet more lube applied, and after another switch in instrument sizes starts to rub Bella's clit with her forefinger in sync with the motion of the intruding sound.

Before long simple pleasure overrules morals and decency, and ever so often low, guttural moans escape Bella's parted lips. The more she reacts and even starts to buck her hips slightly forward, the more Beth picks up speed and depth of every single motion, until Bella looks ready to come undone any moment now.

Only that then she makes a crucial mistake.

Instead of turning to me it is Beth who she pleads with to let her come, and Beth in turn halts what she is doing even before I utter a rather unfriendly

"Stop."

It takes her only a moment to realize her mishap but a glare from me makes her shut her mouth before a note of protest or apology can come out. I keep staring at Bella until she's nearly cringing in her restraints before I turn to Beth, silently asking her opinion on what she thinks is appropriate punishment that doesn't ruin our further plans right on the spot. She offers me a barely visible shrug, then her eyes dart to the case the still unused sounds are stored in.

"Do you like getting your peehole fucked?" I ask her, turning my tone deliberately crude.

Bella swallows as she nods, new color rising in her cheeks.

"Yes, Master."

"Do you want Beth to continue?"

"Yes, please!"

"Do you think you deserve to come?"

She hesitates at the question, conflict plain in her eyes. A moment of lip biting ensues, before she slowly nods, but her gaze is unsure.

"Yes, Master?"

I snort as I lean closer, then quickly twist her rubber band pinched nipple hard. Bella lets out a high keen before she gets a grip on herself, the sound of her ragged breath as she deals with the pain loud in the otherwise silent room.

"Yes, you what?"

Her eyes keep searching my face but I can see her relax already when she realizes that I don't intend to keep her from climaxing. I briefly wonder just how much she will curse herself for that assumption later, but of course don't let her know my devious thoughts.

"Yes, your needy cumslut deserves to come while being fucked in her peehole!"

Her breathy voice and obviously not fake enthusiasm make me laugh, and it's easy to grant her her plea – with one condition.

"I guess you do. If you manage to, that is," I point out cryptically, then go on as I turn to Beth. "But I think she can handle a thicker sound, how about two sizes up?"

"Certainly," Beth agrees, her tone very close to an evil purr as she's already reaching for the new

instrument.

Bella's eyes are wide when I look back to her but she doesn't speak up, although she involuntarily cringes away when Beth is done lubing up the new sound. Something between a hiss and a whine leaves her lips once Beth starts pushing it into her slowly, but I trust Beth to know how far she can go without doing any damage at all.

Soon enough that assumption proves true when Bella's sounds of discomfort turn into more wanton exclamations of need, but it's clearly a challenge for her to actually let go and relax far enough to be able to climax. Thankfully we have time enough, and even when Bella finally comes I nod for Beth to continue. As much as I love tormenting Bella by keeping her from coming, watching her writhe in ongoing ecstasy is beautiful to behold. And it's not exactly as if that isn't a form of torment in itself anyhow.

Bella climaxes again with a long drawn cry before Beth stops her ministrations, a satisfied if evil smile on her face as she gets up from the chair and starts collecting her things. She leaves the speculum and butt plug in, though, as she steps away to make room for me.

I leave Bella some time to calm down before I kick away the chair and lean over her, making sure with a few light touches that the circulation in all her restricted body parts is still okay. She barely reacts except for a low groan when I shorten the lengths of rope that keep her legs spread and tied to the wall behind her, forcing her ass a little further off the bench. I might have to release her legs later if she's too tensed up, but for now I like her to stay just the way she is, all helpless and with her breasts straining against the rubber bands.

Slowly closing and extricating the speculum from her vagina is a rather wet process, and as usual Bella seems dismal about feeling so empty all of a sudden. I smile lopsidedly at her as I put on the white latex gloves before I slide three of my fingers into her hot, wet sex. Bella arches into the touch, her lips parted in a barely audible moan, and I feel her relax around me almost instantly.

I don't dawdle but pick up finger fucking her hard and fast, while I pinch her clit with my free hand. The sounds she emits make my cock hard, begging to be buried deep inside of her, but I do my best to will my erection away.

There will be ample time for that later, but right now I have something else in mind.

Something very close to a complaint leaves Bella when she feels the plug deflate once I open the valve, but at my pointed look she falls silent while I withdraw it. For a moment I consider fucking her ass right now to relieve some of the tension inside me, but I decide I can wait a little longer. She definitely approves of having my fingers back inside her cunt, and I take my time pushing her closer to the edge once more.

By the time I feel the walls of her pussy start to clench around me in the lightest of contractions I ease up a little, but just enough to let her calm down, not shake her out of her still prevalent orgasmic bliss. It's easy enough to tickle her g-spot, and soon Bella is humping back at me quite fervently. At least until I stop and withdraw my fingers once more to let her catch her breath.

There's still some lube left in the previously sterile syringe so I use that to coat my left hand up to my wrist. Bella is way too busy enjoying herself, her eyes half closed, so she doesn't notice right away what I'm doing. When I rub the remaining lube around her clit she rewards me with a downright wanton moan as she shuts her eyes for good.

Beth is watching us from somewhere to my side, and when I briefly look at her I see her shoulders shake with silent mirth.

Turning my attention back to Bella I slowly slide first two of my fingers back into her, then three. Her eyes close completely as she relaxes into my touch, a slight smile playing around the corners of her mouth. We usually don't use any lube for vaginal finger fucking as she's fortunately easily turned on, but it's obvious that she's enjoying it now.

Going even slower I add a fourth finger, and I can feel her clench around me for a moment before she relaxes again. I'm sorely tempted to just go on and see how long it will take her to catch on, but I know that's a sure way to set myself up for disappointment.

"Bella, look at me."

Her eyes flutter open and she blinks twice before her eyes focus on me, her cheeks still slightly red from the exertion of climaxing. All the while I keep fucking her slowly, but once I'm sure I have her attention I start to go a little deeper while I spread my fingers a little more. Her teeth dig into her bottom lip when she stifles a sound, but from the way she keeps being relaxed I figure it's a moan.

"Do you like that, having four of my fingers inside of you?"

She nods, and when I cock my head to the side she adds a languid, "Yes, Master."

"How does it feel to you?"

My question confuses her for a moment, but she doesn't hesitate much before she replies.

"Uhm, really nice with the lube. So wet. Slick. Full. Awesome," she adds with a laugh. I return her smile warmly but apparently some of my devious glee seeps into it because all of a sudden I feel her tense and she seems a lot more alert. She doesn't ask why I want to know all that but I can see the question plain in her eyes, and for once I really want to see what's going on inside her head.

"Can you guess why I'm asking you that right now?"

More lip biting occurs, and for a few seconds her cunt is positively squeezing my fingers.

"You're not going to stop at just four fingers, I figure?"

My grin confirms her assumption, but I still do her the courtesy of answering.

"Not unless I have to."

The intensity of our locked gazes makes my skin crawl but in the best of ways, and after a moment she nods as she leans her head back against the bench. All the while I keep working my fingers deeper into her, until finally I stop to add my thumb, pressing it against my palm and in between the others.

Bella doesn't tense up but there's definitely some resistance, not that that's much of a problem. As excited as I am I force myself to go even slower, and to turn my motions more deliberate. She still goes rigid and makes a small sound, so I stop to let her adjust before I resume.

"You have no idea how long I've been dreaming about fisting you," I tell her, hoping that whatever blocks there are in her mind can be circumvented like that before they add to the physical barriers I have to overcome.

She seems a little surprised at my words, then clearly holds her reply back, something I really don't need right now.

"You're allowed to speak freely until we're done with this. In fact, I want you to tell me how whatever I'm doing to you makes you feel."

Her next exhale is a little strained but she nods, then looks away briefly.

"I feel kind of, well, pretty full already."

I smile encouragingly at her while I push in a little deeper, and after a moment I feel the resistance lessen and my hand slides in a little further, with just the hard part – my knuckles – still ahead of us.

"Care about being a little more specific?"

She shrugs, as much as she can restrained as she is, and I can tell she feels a little uncomfortable voicing her thoughts. Can't have that.

"I'm kind of, err, a little uneasy about the, uhm, implications ..."

"Straight talk, Bella, or I'm going to whip your ass bloody instead."

The brief reminder that we're still in our roles seems to work wonders, because the hesitant stutter leaves her voice. And for now I decide not to act on the stubborn set of her jaw.

"I'm afraid I'm either too tight now, or not tight enough anymore afterwards."

I can tell that both admissions cost her dearly and some of her previous blush is back, but the defiance in her gaze is easily recognizable for insecurity now. For a moment I feel like barking at her for coming up with such a nonsense, but I know that will only get her to use her safeword, and we'll be locked in a hell of a fight later. I hate to see her worry about anything concerning her body, and even more when she thinks she's not good enough for me in any way.

Easing up a little at first I gently push against her muscles, but she's starting to cramp for good, so I withdraw my hand completely and instead return to fucking her with just three fingers. Bella seems

confused at first, and I barely hold back a harsh laugh.

"What, do you really think I'm going to force this just to prove a point?"

It's not my intention but my words clearly wound her, and with a sigh I try to backtrack to before the point where my own resentments got the better of me.

"Bella, listen to me. If you don't want me to fistfuck you, I'm not going to.

But I know that you love the sensation of being full, that you love being stretched, it's just a logical next step. You don't need to have born any children to be able to take my whole hand inside, nor will doing so stretch you permanently. Your vagina, like your anus, is mostly muscles, and muscles can stretch and accommodate when you want them to, but they can also clench down hard as well. When you're not ready I don't comfortably get a finger into your ass, either, but a little time and I can fuck you with my cock without you feeling like I'm tearing you apart. It's not that much different than that."

I feel her relax a little so I go back to working four fingers into her.

"But my ass isn't as tight as it used to be before you started sodomizing me on a regular basis."

I can't say if she's already convinced and just teasing me, or if she's still working through this, so I don't crack any stupid jokes right now although several come to mind.

"And that bothers you?"

She thinks about it for a moment but then shakes her head, and I can feel the physical resistance give a little more. Adding my thumb again I push on, while I start rubbing her clit in turn.

"Just relax and let me in. If you feel like it's getting too much you have to tell me, but we have all the time in the world."

Bella nods again, determination now replacing the stubbornness from before, and slowly but surely I feel her relax and open up to me. When I'm sure she can take it I push a little more, not harder but more persistent, and after a minute or two the worst of the block suddenly disappears.

A loud gasp that's probably more surprise than pain leaves her when my hands slips into her up to my wrist, and I force myself to keep absolutely still. My fingers are already starting to tingle from the pressure but I know that even the smallest motion can unbalance her now. She needs time, and time is what I'm more than happy to give her. After all, once she gets over the initial intense sensation I might actually get to the part where I can do with her whatever I want to.

Her ragged pants finally quiet down but her eyes are still huge, and I can see her arms straining where she's inadvertently trying to free her bound wrists. Beth is suddenly there right next to her, her voice obviously soothing Bella even more as she keeps talking to her softly.

"Like it?" I finally have to break the tension, and bastard that I am I wriggle two of my fingers ever so slightly. Bella's answer is a loud shriek followed by her jerking her hips – although towards me and

not away – which of course causes way more friction than I've intended. A rather emphatic

"Holy fucking shit!" leaves her while her whole body seems to buck as much as it is capable, before she goes slack once more. Catching my gaze she grins at me, her whole face aglow.

"Fucking amazing!"

I chuckle darkly while Beth and I share a smile, before I turn my full attention back to my beautiful sub.

"Want me to continue?"

"Please!"

And so the real fun begins.

Some women have problems climaxing the first few times getting fisted, but Bella clearly doesn't belong to them as I find out the moment I get a chance to resume a very shallow, extra gentle pace of thrusting inside of her. I immediately still when she clenches hard around me, but realize quickly what's going on when a near incoherent string of profanities alternating with apologies answers me.

I can't really punish her for being so wonderfully responsive – not that I ever planned to – so I tell her to come at will without having to ask for my permission, before I set a slightly faster pace.

What follows is one of the most amazing sessions of my life.

Not only does Bella like the sensation of my whole hand inside her, she can take it rather well, too. Before long her hesitant moans turn loud and needy, and more often than not it's her demand that makes me increase my ministrations, not my own. For once I'm happy to let her set the pace, although things get pretty scrambled once Beth and Bella start kissing again while Beth peels the rubber bands from Bella's tormented tits. I'm quickly losing count how often she's come yet, and just keep on fucking her when her cunt is relaxed enough to let me.

By the time I withdraw my hand completely for the last time Bella is a complete mess, lube and her own juices covering her sweat slicked body all over. She's happy and she can't seem to stop smiling, but as wonderful as it feels to have been the one causing all that, my balls are so blue it's a miracle they haven't fallen off yet. While Bella seems oblivious Beth of course notices the painful erection in my pants, and with a chuckle she nods over at the mats on the other side of the room.

"How about we take care of that with a nice Bella sandwich? After all it's always best to show her first hand just how much her sweet little pussy can still strangle your cock. Particularly after that workout. Don't wait for me, I still have to get my strap-on."

I'm not sure Bella is still able to walk so I just pick her up and carry her over to the mats once she's freed from all the restraints. A simple look into her face confirms that she's still horny as hell, and when I flop down onto my back her fingers are already working on the fly of my pants. I quickly kick the leather off my feet, then just lie back as she straddles me.

"Fuck yourself on my cock. Show me that you can make me come without the help of your mouth and hands."

I only need to grab my cock long enough so she can align herself properly, then I feel her hot, welcoming cunt envelope me. True, she might not be too tight right now, but even before she's fully impaled on my dick the walls of her pussy grip me hard, and with the friction of her moving up and down fast I'm instantly in heaven.

Beth joins us a short while later, after she has ditched her skirt and donned her strap-on. She laughs when I have to grab Bella's hips to keep her still enough so Beth can ease the thick, dark blue dildo into her ass, the sensation making both Bella and me moan loudly.

Fuck, but I've *missed* this. And judging from the way Bella is leering down at me, I'm not the only one.

Without much command from my brain my hands reach up to cup her face gently for a moment, and her answering smile nearly takes my breath away. Then I'm reaching behind her body where I can catch both of her wrists in one of my hands to keep her retrained, before I pull her down and devour her mouth. And once I feel Beth getting a good hold on Bella's hips, I start fucking her in earnest.

Tension is building up fast inside of me, and for once I don't feel bad about the added something about the sensation of my cock rubbing against another one through the walls of Bella's cunt and ass. The way she's bucking against me and moaning into my mouth only add to it all, and I feel myself start to come – when Bella grows stock still above me, a second before her whole body starts to tremble.

I have a split second of time to decide what to do, but the realization that Bella is crashing makes it easy for me. My own orgasm all but forgotten I let go of her, just when a strangled "Red!" somehow makes its way over her lips. Beth is only a little slower to react than me, and moments later Bella is huddled wrapped in my arms, sobbing uncontrollably against my chest.

Beth and I share a partly frustrated look over Bella's head, but she doesn't seem half as concerned – or surprised – as I am.

My eyes narrow at her just as Beth straightens and comes to her feet, but Bella's voice shifts my attention to her.

"Shit, I'm okay, really, I just can't

stop

fuck!"

She obviously wants to say more but the rest is swallowed by her sobs. I keep holding her while I stroke her back, murmuring to her that it's okay and that she should just let it out. Meanwhile I follow Beth with my eyes as she leaves the room, and I can't help feel a certain amount of resentment towards my former Mistress.

My brain is, quite frankly, too fried to really make sense of all of this, but I can't shut up the voice inside my head that tells me that this was, in a way, a different test for both of us. Only that I'm not sure I've passed. And the sinking feeling in my guts tells me Bella hasn't done too well, either.

I don't really get a chance to fully develop those thoughts, though, as Bella needs my attention now, and in the end she's all that counts. So I do what I can to comfort her while she bleeds off tension the only way her body and mind are able to, and after a while she stops crying. I repeatedly tell her that I understand her reaction, that it has happened to me before, that crash when everything suddenly becomes too much and is simply overwhelming, but I have no idea if my words change anything. I'm just happy she lets me comfort her and doesn't try to take off like the first time this has happened in our first week together, and after a while even the voice inside my head shuts up.

Showering together helps Bella ground herself more, although she seems oddly terse when I try to be more of a gentleman than I usually am. Beth is waiting for us when we come back out of the changing room, and as she acts as if nothing has happened, I don't approach the subject, either. We chat about what we've done, Bella even tries to crack a few jokes, but the whole atmosphere is weird and after a while we all decide it's best to leave it at that.

At least until we're in the car.

I know for sure something is up when Bella withdraws from me further once we're just the two of us again. She's fiddling with the radio, and after she tunes in to a pop music station – something Bella normally never does –

I'm finally having enough.

"We need to talk about this."

Out of the corner of my eye I see her grow still, but when I turn my head and look at her, my fingers tight around the steering wheel, she's all innocent wide eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what just happened."

She's still playing dumb, but the suddenly haunted look in her eyes gives me the creeps.

"I'm okay now. You said so yourself, sometimes you drop, and that's it. And it's been an awful long time since my body got such a thorough workout from all sides like that."

I don't respond to that – I don't think I need to when she bites her lip hard –

but just when I'm about to give voice to the thought clamoring around in my head my phone rings. I try to ignore it but then realize that it's Rose's ringtone, and after a long look at Bella I pick up.

"Yeah?"

"Edward? Get the fuck over to the hospital right fucking now, my water just broke and I can't reach Em, he's at the motherfucking gym where the reception is crappy and I *need you right fucking now!* "

That pretty much puts an end to our previous conversation, and after making sure that she has already called an ambulance I hand Rose over to Bella so I can take a U-turn at the next intersection and speed right back the way we've come.

Part of me is glad that years of medical training pretty much wipe my personal issues from my brain, but I know that this isn't over yet. Strangely enough Bella doesn't look as relieved about the unexpected reprieve she gets, but instead seems downright miserable. Which in turn makes me wonder again if I'm not just projecting my own insecurities onto her, and this is really about something else entirely. I don't know if that's a good thing, or not.

Chapter 18

It takes us only fifteen minutes to reach the hospital, but to me at least they seem endless. Even more so that dividing my attention between the light traffic and Bella doesn't help things much.

I have no clue what is going on inside her head – of course I can guess, but I've been wrong about things that squick her before so I try to keep myself from assuming anything. I'm still glad that halfway into the trip she visibly draws herself up and gets her phone out to place a few calls. After trying and failing herself to reach Emmett she calls Rosalie's parents who live on the East Coast to fill them in that they can reschedule their planned flight from in three weeks to now. Next is Alice, a very brief call as Alice seems to be itching to get going herself. But then I see Bella hesitate, and she stares at her phone for at least a minute.

"Do you need to use mine? I think my batteries are still more than halfway full."

She nearly jumps at the sound of my voice, her reaction weird enough for me to consider turning around again and letting all the other professionals deal with Rose having her baby, but Bella sounds calm when she answers, if a little reluctant.

"No, it's fine, I was just thinking." Then she looks away from me, ahead at the road. "How much longer?"

"Maybe five minutes."

"Good."

She drags her fingers across the display, probably looking for a name in her call list, before she puts the phone back to her ear.

"Jazz? Hi, Bella here. Yes, I figured Alice would have called you by now.

Are you in the area? We can't reach Emmett on the phone, Rose said he was at the gym and I don't have their number. Can you maybe

?

Awesome, see you there."

This must have been the shortest and most cutoff conversation I've heard them have ever, and the way Bella keeps staring at the display after ending it is even more disconcerting.

"Bella?"

Her eyes flit to me but she's shaking her head in answer, a gentle but obvious rebuke. I try to decide what to do, but then keep to just trust in the strength of our relationship. She will come to me when she's ready to talk, and with a little luck we'll be out of the hospital soon anyway.

When we finally get there I take Bella around the building through the less used side entrance – sometimes it pays to have an access card – and we get to the right floor just as Rose arrives. She's hard to miss, arguing at the top of her lungs with one of the nurses already, and I have to hold back a grin. Even distressed as hell and clearly in pain Rose is a force to be reckoned with, and today she doesn't look like she's taking 'no' for an answer. I step in when things seem to take a turn for the worse, and dropping my name *suddenly* gets a room free where none has been ready before. I normally don't pull that card, but Rose's grateful smile when she can finally get out of the wheel chair and into a proper bed tells me it was the right thing to do this time.

"Thanks for coming so quickly. I was really losing it when I called you."

I hug her softly, then step aside so Bella can do the same.

"You're welcome. And trust me, no one really expects you to act all rational today of all days."

I get a wan smile for that, but then a wave of contractions hit her, and Rose is busy alternating between gnashing her teeth and cursing for a while.

Meanwhile her doctor enters, a woman I know from passing in the cafeteria but we've never exchanged words except for greetings. She nods at us, then starts talking to Rose in a calm voice, radiating confidence and professionalism both. I follow their exchange with only half my attention, while the rest is on Bella. Except for what I had to learn at med school about the whole birthing process I'm at a loss here anyway, and right now I'm more concerned with Bella than Rose. Eventually she notices my scrutiny and gives me those same fake innocent eyes as before. Not much I can do about that now anyway.

Rose's doctor leaves again after sending for a nurse, and we have a few moments for us.

"How are you feeling?"

Rose glares at me pointedly.

"Like I'm giving birth to an elephant! And did you hear that bitch at the reception, she told me I should stop throwing such a tantrum as I'm still in the early phase – shit!"

Even without recording the time between contractions I can tell this is less than seven minutes, and while it is entirely possible that Rose is acting a little on the dramatic side, I have to agree that she seems farther along than said Nurse estimated.

"When did your contractions start?"

"Did you even listen to any of the shit I told Dr. Holt?"

"Obviously not," I try to pacify her, and am surprised when it seems to work.

"This might sound weird but at first I didn't realize what it was. I mean I'm three weeks early, and I've been having insane back pains for days, I kind of thought it was just more of the same. I even sent Em

to the gym myself because I wanted some time alone so he wouldn't get all concerned over every groan. See what good that did me?"

I keep smiling at her, and after a moment she reciprocates.

"Don't worry, Em will be here soon. Bells called Jasper and told him to pick him up and bring him here. In no time you'll be able to curse him at the top of your lungs for getting you into this."

I half expect Rose to just shrug the news off but she smiles at me mentioning Em knocking her up. Then she cranes her neck and reaches out to Bella, who takes her hand after a second.

"Thanks, B. Really, thank you."

For a moment Rose looks ready to start crying, but then she huffs and rolls her eyes, probably at herself.

"Gah, just look at me, a raving lunatic one moment, a crybaby the next! I can't wait when this fucking cocktail of hormones is out of my blood stream!"

"You're handling it pretty well. I don't even want to think of what a mess I will become when I'm pregnant," Bella replies, even offering a light snicker that sounds real.

Rose huffs as she draws her knees as close to her belly as she can manage, lying on the side as she is, and for a moment her eyes scrunch close, her shoulders shaking as she's trying to ease the discomfort.

"You'll never know! But one thing is for sure, when it's your time to be lying here I'm sure you'll manage the physical side a lot better than I do."

I inadvertently hold my breath at Rose's retort, hoping that Bella will just laugh it off, but no such luck. If I weren't so concerned about her, the way her cheeks literally drain of color would be plain comical, but as it is there is nothing funny about it. Her lips open as if to offer an answer but she only heaves two shallow breaths, then she's suddenly running from the room and I'm quite frankly too perplexed to react.

While I still try to decide if I should run after Bella or give her some time Rose clears her throat, drawing my attention back to her. She's frowning, but mostly looking confused.

"Seriously, you know how much I love insulting people but I have no idea what this is all about."

"It's nothing you did." And well, it really isn't.

Now her frown is close to that harpy look she has perfected years ago, and I give up with a sigh.

"It's something I did. Happy?"

"You sure? Because I've made the same lame joke at least ten times over the last months and she always laughed it off. I mean obviously this doesn't translate in any way to what you kinky

fluffybunnies do in your free time."

I try to decide just how much I should tell her, but the longer I hold my tongue, the more she seems interested. Knowing Rose she will keep asking, never minding the company, and it's probably for the best to tell her now with just us in the room.

"I don't think she freaked because you were joking about her pain tolerance."

"But?"

It has never before occurred to me that the day would come where I feel weird about any of the things I do in the playroom, but right now, looking down at the very pregnant woman before me, something close to unease is creeping up and down my spine.

"Earth to Edward? I can't really get up and slap some sense into you right now, but I promise you, I'll find a way to get you to talk to me."

Offering a slight smile at her reproachful tone, I shrug.

"I think she's more squicked about the fact that an hour ago she had my whole hand where your kid will soon cry its way into this world."

"Fisting huh? Always looks hot on the vids." Trust it to Rose not to bat an eyelash. Her blasé tone is refreshing, but when I look from her to the still empty door I hear her sigh.

"Come on, don't be an ass, go hunt her down and talk to her. Even I get what a headdesk kind of remark that must have been to her. I'll be fine here, I'm sure the moment you're gone that nurse will be back to tell me some shit like that my blood pressure is too high or that my breathing technique sucks or something."

I still hesitate, but the next moment I hear Emmett's voice outside in the hallway, and the way Rose's face lights up I know I can leave her for now.

Rose's room is near the end of the corridor so I guess Bella must have taken off in the other direction. As I round the first corner the nurse's station comes into view where Emmett is right now trying to find out where his wife is, while Alice and Jasper are waiting to the side.

"She must have arrived maybe fifteen minutes ago? Long, blond hair, pregnant?"

I can hear the nurse's exasperated sigh from across the hall – asking for a pregnant woman at the maternity ward is kind of a stupid thing to do, but I'm sure that of the two, Rose is the more focused one. In fact Emmett seems a step away from hyperventilating and I hurry over to show him the way.

Once Em is set on his course I try to decide where to search first, but Alice thankfully interprets my confused glance around right.

"If you're looking for Bella, I saw her head for the restrooms over there."

"Thanks, you're the best, Alice."

She smiles, then shrugs.

"Is she sick or something, it must have been close to five minutes and I haven't seen her come out again. If you want to I can go inside and check on her."

Which would probably be as bad as it can get.

Trying not to let her see how much the idea unnerves me, I shake my head.

"Thanks but I don't think that's necessary. Probably only an upset stomach or something. Or she's reading her emails."

I'm not surprised that Alice buys my somewhat lame answer – maybe she just wants to believe it – but Jazz keeps eyeing me askance for a while longer. I return his questioning gaze with a blank stare, and before either of us can say something Alice is already tugging him along towards Rosalie's room.

I'm even considering going into the restroom but just as I reach the door it opens, a woman in her middle years, probably a grandma-soon-to-be, exits. She eyes me up and down, then indicates the by now closed door at her back.

"Is that your girlfriend sitting on the toilet and crying her eyes out?"

My heart sinks at hearing that, the realization probably plain on my face because she goes on before I can even give her an answer.

"Listen to me buddy, you seem old enough not to knock up the first girl you lay your eyes on. You better make it up to her, will you?"

I fully intend to, although the reason for Bella's distress is probably something this woman couldn't even wrap her head around. When she keeps glaring at me I nod, but then give her the retort her unwanted advice is asking for.

"She's not pregnant, we're just here because a friend of ours is having her baby. Not that it's any of your business."

The woman looks first angry, then a little appalled, and she steps around me before I can say anything further. Not that I intend to.

Hesitating for a moment longer I'm surprised when the door opens again and Bella steps out. Her still somewhat puffy but now dry eyes widen when she sees me hovering right before the restroom, and a hint of a smile appears on her face.

"Can't even let me go to the toilet without missing me, huh?"

"Not when you run off like that, ready to burst into tears any moment."

She frowns, but now she's avoiding my gaze.

"Puking, actually, but never mind, I'm good now."

When she sees my raised brows she sighs, then rubs her eyes.

"Look, Edward, can we please not do this here? I really appreciate your concern, but now's not the time and I'd really like to have that talk where less than half the hospital can hear us."

I nod, if slowly, then reach up so gently cradle her cheek. Her smile widens, and for a moment her eyes close as she relaxes into my touch.

"We can go home, too. Right now. I'm sure Rose will do just fine without two more people standing around uselessly, too."

Bella shakes her head.

"No, of course we stay. She called you first, we can't just leave her now."

"But if you're not feeling welll-"

"I'm fine, okay?"

I cock a brow at her suddenly acidic tone, and after a moment she steps away from me and starts walking down the way we've come.

"Come on, unless you want to hear any more theories about what sordid things we might have been up to in the meantime. And I doubt that this time Rose will be standing guard in front of the restroom door again."

She extends her hand towards me – a peace offering in more than one way

– and I let her drag me back to the others. Part of me wants to make her talk to me right now, but if I've learned anything about Bella in the past years it's how stubborn she can be, a trait's she clearly inherited from Charlie. And what can a few hours hurt?

By the time we join the others to crowd Rose's room Bella is acting nearly her usual self. At least until Jazz tries to draw her to the side, probably to ask if she's okay. She shies away from him, enough to bump into one of the cabinets. Yet when she rounds on him her glare is close to furious, and heads turn all over at her hissed, "Leave me the fuck alone!"

Jazz seems as perplexed at her reaction as I am but he doesn't reply anything, nor does he try to touch her again or even talk to her. I feel his eyes move over to me but I pointedly study one of the monitors instead. If anything, Bella's behavior confuses me more as she's been back to hugging and casually touching Jazz for months, even under Alice's watchful eyes. It doesn't make any sense, and I'm starting to realize that there's a lot more going on than I've thought.

For once ignoring what I can't deal with right now seems like the best idea, and before long Rose distracts us all with her colorful language. Hours pass, and eventually everyone except Emmett is kicked out of the room to give Rose some well needed space.

At eight in the evening Alice and Jasper decide to make a quick dash for the take-out around the corner, and Bella joins them, leaving me behind to wait here. They make it back just in time for Em to come running towards us, still clad in the scrubs the nurses pretty much had to force him into, hollering loudly.

"It's a girl! We have a baby girl!"

I'm a little surprised that he hasn't known before but then I can still remember Rose's laments about him insisting that it should be a surprise.

We barely have the time to congratulate him, then he's running back to join his wife. An hour later the nurse finally lets us see Rose. She looks exhausted but happy, with the barest of frowns on her face. At my cautious question she shrugs.

"It's nothing, but because Mona was so antsy to stop kicking her mommy in the belly they want to keep her under observations for the night. If I'm lucky they'll bring her up tomorrow morning."

She hesitates for a moment, her eyes turning pleading.

"Can you maybe talk with the doc there, see if she's really okay? She was crying and all so she should be fine, but they told me she's a little small, and, you know, terribly concerned mom here."

"Of course. I'll be right back."

I don't have to go look for her doctor for long as she's still with the two nurses who take care of the newborns. Few words are exchanged, and she assures me that little Mona is healthy as a bug. She's more concerned with Rose's blood work, but mother and child should be able to leave the hospital early next week.

Em, who has followed me over, is near ecstatic when I tell him the good news, and he bustles off to let Rose know. I linger a little longer, looking at the handful of newborns, all in their cribs, most of them sleeping peacefully.

I know some people find babies simply adorable, but right now they scare me. Years I've dreamed about having a family with Bella, but since we've hooked up and reality has replaced idle fantasy I'm in no hurry to start one myself. We still have enough trouble just going through our lives without a baby complicating things, as it is.

I hear steps approaching and think it's probably Bella, but when I look to my side it's Alice who is staring at the babies now, the expected awe and happiness plain on her face. Jazz is trailing behind her, looking a little wary, but the moment Alice turns to him he's smiling back at her.

"Just so you know, I want at least two of them! For starters. And once they can run on their own a

whole bunch more!" she informs him.

Inside I cringe, but Jazz doesn't even tense up, but instead hugs Alice from behind and nuzzles her neck until she squeals.

"As many as you want, Alice, as many as you want."

They keep this up for a moment longer, but then Alice extracts herself from his arms and with a last grin in my direction skips off down the hall, probably to tell everyone about her congenial plan to populate the world with her mini-me minions.

Silence is heavy between Jazz and me, and for a while I contemplate not saying anything at all. But quite frankly, right now he looks only a tad better than Bella did when we got here, so I finally open my mouth.

"You didn't tell her yet?" I venture a guess, trying to keep my voice level but a hint of sympathy leaks through.

Jazz hunches his shoulders for a moment, looking defiant, but when I don't add the jibe he's probably expecting, he shrugs.

"Somehow topics like 'hey, remember that motorcycle accident I had when I was twenty? They said I was lucky, not bleeding to death from my ruptured femoral artery when I had that piece of scrap metal jabbed deep into my hip. Well turns out there was some damage after all, and since then my sperm is about as sterile as if you'd mix it with acid. I can still fuck like a Trojan but no blond sunnyboy babies will ever come from these loins' never come up in dinner conversations."

As usual at that point I don't know what to say – I mean what *can* you say to something like that? I understand why he never told Alice – or as far as I know, Bella – but I have a feeling that might change soon now. And it's not gonna be a conversation he'll look forward to.

Maybe it's because things between us have reached a certain non-hostile truce, or because while I sometimes still hate his guts he seems really down right now, but I feel like I have to do something, so I reach out and squeeze his shoulder briefly. He looks at me surprised but then offers a grateful nod in return.

"You know it's gonna be all right. I mean it's not your fault."

"For once," he mutters, but when he sees me smirk rather than frown he shrugs. "I know Alice isn't into me for my baby making potential. But you know how she can get when someone rains on her parade."

I nod. "Sure, but she'll get a grip on herself soon enough. Or maybe she'll take it in stride and just shrug it off. Predictability was never her strong suit."

Jazz grins, then looks back at the sleeping babies.

"Maybe she'll change her mind anyway the first time Rose lets her change the diapers. You never know."

With that I turn around to head back to the others when Jazz speaks up again, his tone cautious.

"Everything okay with you and Bella? She seems somewhat off today."

My first impulse is to bark out that it's none of his business but the fact that he cares for her and got the brunt end of her unease already makes me rethink my answer. And it feels good not to be at each other's throats for once, so I finally decide on a nod.

"She is, but she will be all right soon enough. Just bad timing and all that."

And yes, couldn't be better."

The fact that he looks happy to hear that weirds me out a little, and feeling obliged to I ask the same about him and Alice.

"Couldn't be better," he echoes me, underlining his words with a smile.

"Although you might wanna check back in with her after that talk we're going to have."

I leave it at that and head back to the others, repeating the news Em has already relayed. Rose is looking a little better already, although tired as she is we should probably leave her alone with Em soon. Bella sighs contently as she leans against me after I snake my arm around her waist and draw her close, and even though I know we'll have to work through what has happened earlier soon I'm confident it won't be too bad, relaxed as she seems by now.

Then Rose's parents arrive and we take our leave, using the opportunity to congratulate the happy young family again. Yet just outside of the room I hear a familiar voice behind me, so I turn around, Bella still hugged to my side. Dr. Amanda Blake, my current mentor, looks up from the patient file she's reading right then, smiling absentmindedly at me.

"Hi Edward," she greets me, then looks from me to Bella, seeming a little surprised. "Family planning time already?"

Bella laughs at that, shaking her head. I'm relieved that she sounds about her usual self again.

"Ah, no, a friend of ours had her first baby today. We're just standing around uselessly, well, Edward got to translate some doctorspeak to what the rest of the world understands, but that's about it. I'm Bella, nice to meet you."

"Amanda."

They shake hands, both women immediately taking to each other in their informal way. I'm a little dumbstruck as my mentor is usually very close to

'abrasive bitch' as they get, but we always get along perfectly. She really seems to like Bella as she's as friendly as I've ever seen her, but maybe it's because away from the Emergency Room she can let her guard down.

Maybe the reason she and I get along is that she's had her problems with various colleagues before, but except for a few rumors I haven't found out why. She's definitely one of the best, if not *the* best surgeon in the hospital, and I'm glad she's taken me under her wings. She's also the only one of the residents I'm on first name basis with, probably because she doesn't seem to think everyone fresh out of med school has to be treated like an imbecile.

Then Amanda turns back to me and the pleasant look leaves her face.

"I'm aware this is probably a bad time, and I know you're off rotation until tomorrow evening, but we've just got an interesting case in. Climbing accent, patient's brain dead and I just got the okay from his parents for the organ donations. I know technically Hills is up for assisting me, but quite frankly I'd rather have you there. If you can make time for a multi organ extraction and liver transplant, that is."

Fuck. Talk about bad timing. But for once I know where my priorities lie, and I'm already shaking my head when Bella pokes me in the ribs.

"Don't be stupid, of course you'll stay here for that!"

Unable to hide my surprise I look at her, and she rolls her eyes before she turns to Amanda.

"Please let me talk to Edward for a moment? You can have him right away after that."

Amanda grins, then winks at me.

"See you in 20 downstairs for scrubbing in."

Apparently I don't have a say in this so I nod, still perplexed about Bella's reaction but let her drag me away into one of the more secluded waiting areas. When we're alone I turn to her, but she's already talking before I can do more than open my mouth.

"Please don't be stupid, I know how much you want to do this, I mean even if I didn't give a shit about your work and career – which is so not the case as you know – I'd understand how important and interesting this must be for you. Don't miss this just because you're getting all overprotective now."

"Overprotective? You crashed, then you ran and puked and cried, I don't think I should leave you all on your own tonight."

She sighs, a weary sound, and rubs her eyes before she looks back at me.

"Edward, look, I know I've been a mess today. And still am, kinda, but I'm feeling a lot more like myself by now. And I'm not trying to avoid having that talk, it's just that..." she stops, then sighs again. "I need a little 'me' time right now. And while I'd love to cuddle the whole night with you I'll survive

on my own with a pint of ice cream for a substitute. I'd just feel worse if I knew you'd miss this because of me."

I can tell already that I'm fighting a losing battle here, but I still have to try.

"People have accidents all the time, I'll get another chance at assisting at something like this soon again."

"Please?"

I don't know what to say but my silence seems to stress her more, so I draw her closer to me and kiss her gently. She melts against me after a moment, but pushes away faster than I want her to.

"Remember when you told me about how you were struggling to come to terms with your kinky side? And that I might eventually have to go through that, too? I think that's what's going on with me now. Not in a denial or 'woe is me' kind of way, but -," she breaks off again, then starts anew. "You really don't have to worry about me, I'm fine. Yes, I was somewhat beside myself when we got here, but I've had enough time to clear my head and calm down. But my mind's still a mess and I just need time to sort it out.

And maybe you not being around tonight will even help me? I know that sounds bad, but do you understand what I'm trying to say here? I just need some time to sort this out for myself."

I nod – there's not really much I can do at this point. And I actually understand her a lot better than she probably thinks, having been at that point more than once – or even ten times – in my life.

"Are you sure you will be okay?"

"I am," she assures me immediately. "And if not I'll call Beth, or your mom, or Alice to stay with me. It's not like I don't know anyone who'll share some comfort food with me gladly."

"But we'll talk about this."

"Yes, we will," she promises. "And if I need you to help me sort it all out, I know where to find you. But please, give me some time here, okay?"

"Sure, however long you need," I assure her, then kiss her again, letting the gesture show all the support my words lack.

We spend a few more minutes there before I have to go, and while part of me is a little angry at her for pushing me away like that, I trust her that she knows what she's doing. After a last kiss I bring her to the elevator, then take the stairs down to the ER, trying to ready myself for the unexpected workload ahead of me as fast as I can.

And that's the last we talk about what what has happened on that Saturday for a full week. First I'm not home, then Bella has to do extra hours for the magazine she's writing for, and way too soon it's Friday evening again.

Finally home after a grueling forty hours in the hospital all I really want to do is take a shower and sleep for a month, I know that's not gonna happen when I see Bella waiting for me on the sofa, looking all wound up and wringing her hands.

I saunter over and kiss her but she doesn't even relax, and I barely take the time to shower and grab a bite to eat before I join her. By then my stomach is in knots because her obvious unease is quickly infecting me. Whatever she has to say can't be all good, or she would have been a little less stressed.

At least she's not drawing this out, and starts talking the moment I'm sitting next to her. Her eyes are wide and her fingers now locked around one of the throw pillows, making me even more nervous.

"Okay, please don't freak but before we start I have to ask you one thing?"

"Sure, ask."

"Edward, do you really want to marry me? Because I don't know if my answer's still yes."

That's so not something I've expected, and nothing I've ever wanted to hear her say.

Chapter 19

"You don't want to marry me anymore? Does that mean you don't want me anymore?"

One might have guessed that at a moment like that my voice would sound pressed or something, but I find it's oddly cool. Composed. Which is somehow worse, if you ask me.

Bella blinks, like she so often does to take a moment to work things through, and just that hesitation lifts part of the choke hold the rising emotions inside of me have on my throat. Then her eyes widen and she actually looks horrified.

"What? No! Of course not! I mean how do you even -"

She breaks off then, her fingers digging into her palms as her hands contract into fists, before she suddenly gets up and starts pacing.

"Shit, no, that's not what I want to say! Absolutely not! Gah!"

She throws her hands up in a comical gesture of frustration, then stops a few feet from me, looking about as wound up as I feel.

"I'm really fucking this up, aren't I?"

"That depends on what *this* is supposed to be," I offer. "If you're trying to scare me, it's working perfectly."

Before I can say more she moves back to the couch and sits down again, then puts her hands over her face. I somehow expect her to start crying now – probably because Alice made me watch too many romantic comedies in high school – but instead she looks up at me after a moment, the look on her face fierce.

"I love you. More than life itself. Don't you think I would try to talk to you if something rubbed me the wrong way first before dropping such a bomb?"

Then try counseling or some shit?"

"I'm honestly too confused to make much sense out of anything you say right now," I admit in response.

Bella frowns, then sighs and rubs her eyes.

"Wanna start again?" I suggest, forcing my voice to take on a playful hint.

Her hand immediately drops and she glares at me for a moment, then nods.

"Can't get any worse, right?"

"Well, you could continue by telling me you're going to run off to marry an Alaskan crab fisher ..."

"They do make more money than you at the moment!" she interjects, then pats the couch next to her. "Why don't you sit down and listen to what I really want to say once I get my foot back out of my mouth."

This is actually the first thing she tells me that I can blindly agree with, so I sink down onto the sofa, my knee idly touching hers. Bella gifts me with a brief smile, but she still looks harassed, now even more than before.

Reaching into the pocket of her jeans she pulls out a yellow index card, and I start laughing in spite of myself when I watch her scan whatever she's written down on it.

"Seriously? This talk needs a list?"

"Oh you have no idea," she huffs, then puts the card down on her other side, safely out of my reach. I'm tempted to make a lunge for it anyways, but then her lips are suddenly pressed against mine, her tongue hungrily exploring my mouth. I'm so perplexed that I deepen the kiss without thinking, but before I can even draw her closer she pulls away, a little flushed.

"Much better. So where was I?"

"You were not going to leave me for a sweaty old chain smoker."

"Ah right." Entwining the fingers of her hands around her knee Bella takes a deep breath, but her eyes never leave my face.

"What I was trying to ask you, before I started sounding like a raving madwoman, is if you still want to marry me. Like really start going down that whole picket fence, SUV, two point four kinds road that will likely turn me into a recurring alcoholic at 33."

"Marriage doesn't really mean we have to change the way we live," I try to object, but she interrupts me before I can even formulate the whole thought.

"I know. But this is so not us!"

I want to keep arguing but then something else occurs to me.

"What exactly caused this to start ricocheting in your head?"

She's silent for a moment.

"Alice."

I nod.

"And you mom."

Now I'm starting to frown. "My mom?"

"Yes. And Rose. And two of my coworkers. And stupid people on TV. And every second newspaper or magazine I read. It's as if the world is screaming at me because we're kind of sitting between chairs here with our improper engagement, and I feel like it's all collapsing and trying to drown me ..."

She stops there, her near panicked gaze freaking me out on its own.

"Shit, breathe!"

Bella laughs at my comment, then sighs heavily once more.

"I know I'm kind of overreacting here and not making any sense, but please bear with me? This is all a very interconnected, complicated thing that could morph into a mess – or resolve itself. If I can just get this all out as it should be. It was all so easy in my head!"

I'm silent for a few seconds, hoping that will encourage her, but she's clearly waiting for an answer from me.

"Just tell me, okay? I promise I won't jump to any conclusions until you tell me I can."

She still looks a little skeptical, but then picks up her notes again, scrutinizing them for a while.

"I really don't know where to start, so I guess I'll do it chronologically. If you don't mind."

I nod for her to proceed, and this time she does.

"I guess you still remember that talk I had with Jazz the week after that

Friday?"

It's somewhat amusing that she's still referring to my colossal fuck-up this way, but I don't say that out loud, just nod. I still hate myself most for betraying her like that, but the reason I sometimes feel like kicking his face in is that talk, not that he set me up. Having to pick her up afterwards has been hard enough as it was.

Bella looks at the carpet for a moment, a hint of color creeping onto her cheeks, but when she looks at me again her eyes are bright with anger.

"That's what made me crash last week."

Consider me confused.

"How so?"

It's her turn for the same emotion, but then she shrugs it off and launches into her explanation.

"Okay, back a few more steps. I guess it's obvious that I liked what we did last week with Beth?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly? Hell, Edward, I got off like seven times and moaned and begged you like a wanton slut in heat to fuck me harder, how can that leave even the slightest doubt that I really, really, *really* liked it?"

"Technically the fact that you dropped and were avoiding me later could have meant that it was too much for you."

She keeps staring at me until I shrug. "Or not. Shutting it now. Please go on."

Looking a little pleased at her small triumph, she does.

"As I said, I really liked it. Loved it. Don't get me wrong, I really didn't expect that, and that in itself freaked me out so much that I needed a whole week to just accept it. But it helps to know that neither you nor Beth put any pressure on me there. I know it would have been okay if I'd said, yay, great experience, but hell no to a round two. Not the case, though."

Again she looks at her notes, but this time I'm sure it's just a move to stall a little longer. When she looks back up the anger is back in her eyes.

"I won't lie, when you two double-teamed me after the fisting I wasn't really a hundred percent in the moment there. And I'm sure I wasn't the only one here a little lost in memories."

The way her imploring gaze is burning into my eyes leaves no room for hesitation or sweet talking, and I don't think she'll appreciate that right now anyway.

"No, you weren't. I was thinking about our threesomes with Jazz, too."

It feels oddly good to spell that out without having to feel like shit for once, and I can see the relief in her eyes about my frankness. When she doesn't go on, I venture a guess.

"And that was what set you off? Being reminded of how insecure you felt about what happened back then when that was the last thing you needed right at that moment?"

She thinks about my words for a moment, but shakes her head.

"Sounds plausible but no." Exhaling loudly, she's visibly steeling herself before she goes on. "In the heat of the moment, with my thoughts scrambled and my whole body singing with ecstasy, the only thing I could really think of was how much I liked the sensation. And when I saw that you looked so content and simply *okay* with what was going on it was like this huge weight was lifted from me, like we finally got over all that shit."

Her words mirror exactly how I'm feeling about it – except for the lurking doubt just why she's been crashing so hard and if I could have prevented it from happening – and when I nod my agreement she

smiles slightly.

"But that only lasted for a few seconds. Because for some reason I cannot fathom my mind starts jumping from conclusion to conclusion, and one moment I'm soaring high because everything was great and I just know we're finally over this and I'm really enjoying everything new that you show me – and the next I realize that means that I'm just like you and that every fucking stupid thing Jazz told me about you, all that shit why he thinks you're bad for me and why he pretty much despises you – that's also me.

And even if you take into consideration that he later told me that he's aware you're responsible and you'll only do to me what I want done and stuff, that still means that my best friend that he ..."

More than anything she could have said, her stuttering there tells me just how upset she still is, so I do the first thing I can think of and draw her onto my lap. She doesn't really comply so we end up as a somewhat messy heap of arms and legs with her perched on top of me, but now I can see her face right before my own, which is a definite bonus. Her eyes are still dry but anger has given way to so much pain that I feel helpless and at a loss for what to do, but she starts talking before I can even try to make things better for her.

"I don't even know if any of that is true. And when I think about it rationally now, it's easy to shrug it off and say, who cares what he's thinking?"

"Easy?" I finally chime in doubtfully.

"Easier," she admits. "But in the end it's not important. I don't need his approval or anything, hell, I don't think either of us will ever feel the need to tell him what we're up to nowadays. But right then it pretty much broke my neck, and then I had to talk to him on the phone and in the hospital, and when he got all concerned and protective when he was the real reason why I was feeling like shit I snapped. And all along I was afraid you'd see right through me and get offended that I had my panties in a twist over what he thought of me when finally I felt like we'd really started dealing with all this –

and I was so glad when I could go home and curl up in bed and just cry for an hour, on my own, without you hovering there, helpless and frustrated and beating yourself up for something you had no power over."

Hearing her say that rankles a little but I know it's true, and not unlike the way I'm sometimes dealing with things. I still feel a little like I've failed her –

I should have been there to comfort her after all – and as if she can read my thoughts Bella goes on.

"I really meant it when I told you I need some time on my own. And yes, maybe I was avoiding you after that, but I wanted to make sure I got my head set straight on my own before we have this talk. So that I don't, I don't know, make you think I'm dumping you with the first thing I say or something."

We share a smile and I kiss her briefly before she can go on. Bella's own smile brightens, and she

licks her lips as her eyes briefly roam over my face.

"Did I tell you lately how sexy that stubble is?"

"I remember you complaining last week that I was rubbing you raw with it when I was going down on you."

Bella huffs as if I'm just making this up, but the heat in her gaze makes me want to demonstrate that right away. But we're not yet done, and when I prod her gently she resumes explaining instead of letting me ravish her.

"So, that was the reason why I crashed. I needed a few days to really get over that, but eventually I did. And about the same time I got a little more comfortable with the idea of how much I'm really into BDSM. Or maybe the memories of just how good everything felt shot-circuited my brain too much and made me accept it. Either way, I was just about ready to tell you that I was good with it all when I met up with Alice and Esme for Wednesday lunch, and after an hour of fawning over little Mona and babies in general they pretty much told me that I should finally make you propose properly.

And why we haven't set a date yet. And where we want to marry. And who gets to be the Maid of Honor, Best Man, flower girls, if Alice should design the dresses or chose some, and when they decided over my head which wedding cake we should order I had about enough."

Her gaze leaves my face as she picks at some invisible lint on my t-shirt.

"This is so not us. The whole marital bliss thing I mean. I really want to stay with you for the rest of my life, but the more I think about it, the more I feel locked in, restricted. And quite frankly, I don't want them to influence us like that. I want that any kind of commitment comes from us, and only us. That's why I asked you, do you really want to marry me? As in, do you feel like you want me to be your wife? Because I'm really having problems reconciling my picture of you with the term husband."

My gut still clenches at her explanation, but now that I know where she's coming from, it all makes so much more sense.

"It's really just that? That you don't want to be pressed into a mold and have some commitment issues?"

The way she's biting her lip is most enticing, but I force myself to keep focused.

"It's not the commitment that scares me. Actually, that's another point on my list, but I want to have everything else cleared up first."

Now she has me intrigued of course, but I do my best not to get too antsy.

"If you say you don't want to marry, I'm okay with that. I never want you to agree to something just to indulge me."

"But you're ready to do that for me?"

Sometimes I hate how well she seems to know me, but instead of answering right away I mull over the topic for a while.

"I won't lie, I'm a little hurt that you don't want to marry me. Maybe it's old-fashioned of me, but somehow the thought that there's something there that really ties us together, makes you mine as much as me yours is something I've been looking forward to. But I won't be devastated if we just live together in wild sin forever instead. I don't need a formal commitment in front of witnesses to be happy with you."

She nods, clearly relieved.

"I'm not even saying no to marriage forever. If the day comes when we both want it, I'll be the happiest woman alive to become your wife. But I don't think we're there yet. Do you?"

"No," I finally admit after swallowing hard. We really aren't, and suddenly I'm glad that she has dragged this issue up.

The intensity in her gaze increases as she listens to my admission, until she looks even a little giddy.

"What would you say if we make our own kind of commitment?"

"Such as?"

More lip biting ensues, but I'm sure that it's not a conscious effort to drive me insane.

"Well, I just told you that I'm really into what we've been up to of late?"

"Yes, like ten minutes ago, I'm not that senile yet."

Bella laughs but isn't so easily deterred from her speech.

"What if we base our commitment on that? I mean, it should be something special and meaningful for us, and no one else. No one else needs to know or understand or approve."

I'm slowly starting to get what she means but still wait for her to spell it out.

"I've been thinking about this a lot this week," she confesses. "And I've done some reading. I know that you're not into the whole 24/7 thing, and neither am I, but I have to admit, I wouldn't mind if we kind of, well, put a little more emphasis on our D/s relationship."

"Such as?"

It's fun to see her squirm, her cheeks resuming a faint blush, but she doesn't evade my gaze.

"Obviously that's up to you," she quips, then offers me a sweet smile. "But aside from playing more often or trying to up the intensity or something, I figured we could find something a little more substantial." Again she stops, and I'm starting to wonder if she would speed up if I plain out ordered

her to spill it.

"Bella?"

"Hm?"

"Stop dragging this out. Whatever is spinning round and round in that beautiful head of yours is very likely not that out there, or nothing I haven't heard a few times already."

She makes a face for a moment, probably thinking I've insulted her lack of creativity, but then she relaxes again, even smirks.

"What do you think of getting matching tattoos? And I mean matching in the way of we both choose something on our own, but add a small detail from the other's design. That way if things go really wrong between us we're not stuck with each other's name on our left butt cheek or something for all eternity."

I really like the idea, and my grin must have given me away because Bella whoops and then kisses me with a passion and hunger that's so like her when she gets her way. Not that I'm complaining, not at all.

Kissing soon turns to more, but for once my mind won't shut up, and before she can get her hands into my shorts I stop her, much to my cock's dismay.

"Do you have anything important planned this weekend?"

"Why?"

"How about we schedule your birthday present for this weekend? Just call the resort, get in the car, in three hours we should be there and then it's the whole weekend just for us."

"But don't you have to work?" she interjects, way too reasonable.

"I'll just call in sick. They can do without me for two days, and I've been working my ass off for the last months, I need a break."

She's still skeptical, but when I gently push her off me so I can reach for the phone she doesn't protest. I first call my boss, then the resort, and within ten minutes Bella is running up into the bedroom to start packing.

Amanda's knowing laugh is still ringing in my ears when I follow her but turn the other way upstairs to get a few things from the playroom. I guess my lie has been pretty obvious, seeing as it's only been fifty minutes since Amanda has last seen me perfectly healthy, but I'm sure I will find a way to make it up to her.

Contemplating for a few minutes what I could do to her this weekend I only pack some rope and a few toys as a rather devious idea starts forming in my mind.

A short while later we're both sitting in the car, excited and grinning as we leave the city for the countryside. After she's done fucking with the radio stations again Bella leans back and regards me levelly.

"Still weird. I would have thought that when I tell you I want you to go mean on my cute little ass more often you'd lock us in at home, not take a vacation from all that."

I don't even have to work on turning my grin into a lopsided, evil smile.

"Who says I'm planning to leave your ass alone the next few days?"

She takes that in with her lips pursed, but then starts laughing.

"Let me guess, it was unnecessary wishful thinking when I packed that new lingerie I got last week?"

"I wouldn't say that," I muse. "But you better keep everything you want to wear ever again in your bags, because I can't guarantee that the rest will be in any state resembling proper clothes when I'm done with you."

Bella only bites her lip again but doesn't reply, and the glazed over look on her face tells me that she definitely approves.

I think a few days away from home and the established routines will do us a lot of good.

Chapter 20

Sometimes all you need is talk, and all problems will miraculously resolve themselves.

I've never fully believed in this, but now I think I'm converted. The farther we get from home, the freer I feel, as if an invisible weight has been lifted off my chest, and judging from the carefree way Bella is talking and laughing next to me, I'm sure I'm not the only one thinking like that. Part of me is still a little sore about her not wanting to marry me, but I've really meant it when I've told her I don't need to seal our love for each other with any kind of contract.

Obviously it's not the fact that we won't tie that knot after all that has us both exuberant, but that for the first time in ages I at least feel unencumbered. Like everything is resolved, all issues are dealt with, and we get a chance at a fresh start. I even have to admit that in a twisted kind of way it's a relief to see that Bella is also struggling with the shit Jazz has been spreading. I really don't want her to hurt, and I wish that I'd have the words to wipe all her concerns away, but it also shows that she finally realizes the situation I've been in ever since that day. Why her forgiveness alone didn't just make everything okay. And just like she has helped me drag myself out of the emotional hole I've dug myself in deep, I intend to lend her a hand to get out of her own.

We arrive at the resort a while after nightfall, and Bella snickers when the nice elder lady at the reception apologizes to us that they've had to give us the most remote cabin they have. A short while later we're all settled in, ready to fall right into bed and chase the last ghosts of anxiety from our earlier talk away – but Bella has other plans.

"Did you see the hot tub out back?"

I haven't, actually, but she's not even waiting for my answer. By the time I've managed to locate it in the absolute dark between the cozy little cabin and the forest Bella is already naked, and up for some skinny-dipping mischief. Only carrying two candles to make up for the lack of illumination she 'forgets' to turn on for obvious reasons she's out of the room over the patio door before I know what's happening, her disappearance followed by splashing sounds and her delightful laughter teasing me.

"Hurry up, this is amazing!"

Never one to hesitate to shed my clothes I follow her example and join her after a quick dash over the dark, dew wet lawn. Even though summer isn't gone that long yet the night air is uncomfortably cool, making the warm water even more enticing as I ease myself into the dark hot tub.

Before I know what hits me Bella's body is pressed against mine, causing me to lose my footing, but I can't complain as her eager mouth on mine cuts any sound that might have left me short. The tub isn't really large so there's not that much room where I could sit down anyway, and before long I have her straddling my lap with her arms tightly around my neck, both of us submerged below the shoulders. Her fervent kisses soon turn deeper and more sensual, and I relax against her, simply enjoying myself.

Eventually she pulls back and settles more comfortably against me, her head on my shoulder while

her arms dip under water to embrace my torso instead, probably because her skin has cooled off too much. For a long while we just stay like that, our bodies still as close as we can get, enjoying the warmth and quiet together.

My mind starts to wander and eventually returns to the last part of our conversation, and Bella shifts her hips suggestively against my hardening cock once she feels it press into her stomach.

"What are you thinking about?"

Her voice is laced with suggestion, making me laugh.

"What devious things I can do to you now."

"Now as in right now, or now as in once we get out of the water?"

I turn my head until I can look at her face, and even the darkness cannot hide the lewd grin she's directing at me.

"Now that you've given me free rein over you."

"Hmm, I definitely like the sound of that."

"Just be careful what you wish for, babe."

She snickers at the term, then pushes away from me a little so that her body is mostly afloat before she crosses her arms over my chest, pillowing her chin there so that her face is right before mine.

"With you? Never."

"Ah, you wait," I grunt, then lean back further so I can stretch out more comfortably. Having her body so close is tempting, but my mind won't shut up now that it has found something to mull over.

"Any expectations you have that you want to share with me?"

She shrugs, then takes a while to think.

"Well, not exactly. It's not that I don't have any ideas rattling around up there, but with all the things I really needed to tell you I kind of didn't have the time to let them grow into more than fleeting wank fantasies."

"And there I was under the impression that you weren't allowed to masturbate," I observe dryly.

Bella laughs, then stretches to plant a single kiss onto my nose.

"And I don't. But that doesn't mean that I never lose myself in a helluva deprived daydream, or spend the last minutes before I fall asleep thinking of what you might do to me if you didn't feel like you'd have to hold back all the time."

"I won't if you don't want me to anymore."

Her breath hitches at that, and the gaze in her eyes is filled with lust and anticipation both, but also a hint of dread, as I'm happy to realize.

"Don't get me wrong, I appreciate a somewhat measured approach to all things a little more out there. But I think we've both grown so much over the last months, and grown together, I feel like we can shed the kid gloves. If we haven't already. And you know that I will step on the brakes if I feel like it's getting too much too fast."

"I know."

Bella gifts me a smile at that, before she lets her eyes drift close.

"I'm just wondering what you packed for our trip here."

"Not much," I admit, making her snort.

"Yeah, like you need all that much anyway."

"Probably. We'll see about that tomorrow."

Silence falls again, only interrupted by the soft splashing sounds of the water as she shifts again. More ideas start forming in my mind, and I decide that now is probably a good time to discuss them with her.

"You said you want to step things up a little bit. Did you mean like me adding a few more rules for you, like the masturbating rule you already follow so diligently?"

She shrugs, then nods.

"Yeah, sure."

I have to admit, the idea of taking more of her personal freedom away is daunting, both in a good and bad way. I've always been more comfortable with upping the physical aspects of my relationships with my subs rather than the mental ones, but then again I've spent most of that time helplessly in love with a woman I thought was out of my reach, which culled most of my desire to be emotionally closer to my subs than necessary. With Bella a pleasant constant in my life I guess I can break that habit, too. And it's not like she won't laugh in my face if I come up with something too ridiculous.

My continuing silence is soon starting to make her restless, a fact I feel very amused about. It's as if now that the option is out in the open, she can't wait for me to complicate her life.

"You know why I'm a little hesitant about this, right?"

For a moment she is confused, but then her brow furrows in understanding.

"Tanya?"

I nod, pressing my lips together, but like I've been inwardly hoping, she latches on to that.

"You never really talk about her."

"Because there's not that much to tell. I mean she was a psychotic, abusive bitch. If anyone asks me who my first dominant has been the answer will always be Beth."

"Of course. But I don't see how anything she did would make you tuck in your tail and run from a chance to explore something new together."

A few things actually come to mind that I could say now that might change her mind about that, but in the end she's right.

"Beth only had one single rule for me, which was no wanking while I was her sub. It was easy not to break that rule, and whatever else she demanded of me in the playroom, it always made me feel wholly myself. I never want you to feel so caged in your own mind as I did with Tanya."

Bella is silent for a few seconds, then she shrugs.

"I love you, that bond is already more restricting than anything else you could ask of me, and I love feeling that way. Maybe you should just give it a try? I'm sure the control freak part of your nature will greatly enjoy keeping me on a shorter leash."

Letting my hands roam over her sides until I can grab her ass I pull her lower body closer to mine again while my eyes keep staring deeply into hers.

"As you wish. There are actually a few things I might want to try."

"Shoot."

Grinning at the phrasing of her reply, I shrug.

"For starters, no more clearly defined playtimes. I think we've been together long enough that you can tell the difference between me fucking you, and making love to you."

"Hm, let me check if I get this right, you holding me down while you fuck the living shit out of me, with all that hair pulling and spanking, that would be fucking. And that hours long caressing and kissing and taking our time probably the other. If we ever really did that."

I smirk at her wink, and she grimaces when she feels me pinch her ass a little too hard to be still called a caress.

"About right, yeah. That also means that you have to ask before you come whenever it's even remotely like play time."

"Oh I don't mind that. I love it when you make me beg for it," she replies with a languid if heated smile, and I make a mental note to remind her of saying that in a few days again.

"You getting so cocky about that clearly means I'm way too lenient with you. In fact I don't really remember a time we've had sex when I didn't let you come eventually. Don't count on that being the norm from now on.

Your orgasm should be a reward, if there's nothing you do that deserves a reward there's no reason for me to grant you release."

She blinks, and I see when exactly she realizes the implications of all that, but she doesn't back down.

"You'll make me work for it, okay. What else?"

"Hm, let me think. Ah, yes, speaking of rewards, you'll better get used to having my cock in your ass more often, because I'll only fuck your cunt on special occasions from now on."

That idea seems to distress her somewhat.

"Does that limit everything you might want to shove into my pussy, or just your cock?"

Her tone more than the words make me laugh.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, you know, more anal sex sounds great but I've been kind of hoping that we'll do more, ah ..."

She hesitates, and I'm sure that she's blushing right now, adding to my amusement.

"Bella, why are you stuttering?"

"I have no idea," she huffs, then laughs. "Okay, this is ridiculous. I can say it if I can do it, right?"

"I'd certainly hope so," I remark dryly. "Just spit it out."

"Fisting. I was trying to talk about that. I'd be really disappointed if you'd keep that to a special occasions only activity. So my question, does that embargo concerning your cock in my cunt also include your hands or other toys, or are you just fucking with my head here?"

"I'm strongly leaning towards the latter."

That draws another delighted laugh from her.

"Speak plainly, please. I really want that answer without any leeway for me to worry I'll grow cobwebs down there any time soon."

"Don't worry, if you want my fist in your pussy I'll never say no. In fact, if we do a little more anal

play I think we can extend that to fisting there, too, eventually."

Her eyes go a little wide at that, but as before it's mostly cautious excitement. To make sure that I disband any weird notions right away, I add, "Don't worry, I know that takes more time. I really don't want you to get hurt. But I love fucking your ass, and I know you do, too, so if you enjoy that same stretching sensation with toys there, too, we can eventually give anal fisting a try. That's all."

"I think I'd really like to do that. Try, I mean. Eventually."

That eagerness, more than anything else she's said that day, makes me realize just how much of a mental journey she's been through of late.

"Okay," I acknowledge her, forcing my enthusiasm mostly from my voice. "If you really want that, we should probably get you used to having something stuck up your bum more regularly."

"Hm, I like the sound of that. So what, you'll sodomize me for hours every day now?"

"If I had the time I would do nothing else anymore," I tease, then shrug at her sad laugh. "But what I was referring to is for you to wear a butt plug for a limited time each day. Let's start with a small one for an hour each evening, and once you feel comfortable with that we can step it up in time frame and circumference."

As excited as she seems about the whole idea, that last part doesn't sit too well with her.

"A small one, seriously? I mean you fuck me often enough when I have one of the medium sized inside me, and I never have any problems with that."

"But you seldom have it in more than a few minutes, and you're usually not moving around. Just try it when we get home, small plug, one hour while you do stuff like loading the washing machine. If I'm too cautious you can always skip right to sleeping every night with a medium sized one."

"Deal."

Her enthusiasm makes me grin, and I nod sagely.

"Once we're back I'll also send you to Beth's shop to pick up a few things I want you to take with you every day from now on."

"Just as?"

"A small vibrator and butt plug, and one of those remote controlled butterfly vibes."

Bella looks a little horrified at me mentioning that.

"You mean the one that's keyed to text messages and such?"

"Someone's been snooping around sex shops, I see?" I tease her.

She shrugs.

"Maybe a little. But that's just mean."

"And your point is?"

Wise beyond her years she keeps her mouth shut at that, but I can see some apprehension lurk in her gaze.

"You said you trust me, remember?"

"Of course I do."

"Then trust me that I won't abuse that. If you want to we can keep some shared calender or something where you can put down important meetings and the likes. And at the beginning at least I'll call you first and make sure I won't put you in a situation that will jeopardize your job."

This time she doesn't hesitate to nod, and even offers me a small smile.

"I know I'm gonna regret this but yes, I trust you. Explicitly. But don't think I won't curse you inside my head!"

"You can curse me all you want, also to my face, but that might get your tight little bum painted with red stripes."

"Might be worth it a time or two," she quips, but her smile remains. I feel the similar look on my face turn evil slowly as I let my hands continue to roam over her body, before I kiss her again. Time will tell if any of this will work, and if it will turn out a burden or enrichment to our days. Just because I've hated feeling restricted in everything I do doesn't mean she won't get off on it.

As both of us seem happy enough with considering our talk concluded now I eventually get out of the tub again, and throwing Bella over my shoulder I carry her inside to the sound of her whooping laughter and futile protest.

Dumping her face-down onto the bed I'm on her before she can flip over, pinning her down with one hand between her shoulder blades as I crouch over her thighs. She's still laughing into the pillows while I angle one-handedly for the lube in the nightstand, but the sound quickly turns into a wanton moan as my fingers push into her ass.

Shifting my weight so that I can hold both of her wrists above her head while most of my body is toughing hers I keep finger fucking her while I whisper into her ear.

"You like that, don't you? Being helpless underneath me while I stretch your ass?"

"Yes!" she gasps, the sound cutting off when I bite into her shoulder. Even restricted in movement as she is I can feel her hips buck back against my hand, drawing an evil chuckle from me.

"You're such a slut."

"Your slut, Master!"

Hearing her utter those words makes my cock yearn for more action than just rubbing against the side of her thigh, so I extract my fingers and rearrange myself again to cover her whole body fully. Once she can shift her legs a bit she eagerly raises her ass, her thighs now pressed together, and I don't keep her waiting much longer.

Once I feel her sphincter gripping the head of my cock I let go of it to instead grasp each of her wrists in one of my hands, before I push fully into her, causing her beautiful body to arch underneath me. I only stop for the few seconds she needs to make herself relax a little, before I pick up a pace that's not exactly rough but not gentle, either. Before long she's trying to fight my grip on her while her hips jerk up to meet mine, a sure sign that she's very close to coming already. I love how easy it is to push her towards that edge sometimes.

As much as I want to keep fucking her hard to reach my own climax fast I force myself to slow down, increasing the depth of my thrusts at the same time. Her haggard breathing turns to low moans, and our motions synchronize a little more. When I nudge her hair away from the side of her face with my nose I see her glare at me, aware that I'm deliberately playing with her, but that only furthers my own enjoyment.

"Got anything to complain, slut?"

"No, Master."

"Not even a little? Like that you probably won't get my cock in your cunt for a week? Month? Maybe never if I feel like using your tight asshole and mouth instead?"

"I so won't complain about that!"

Laughing again I lick her shoulder where I've bitten it before, then go on to suck and bite my way over to her neck. That clearly makes her squirm, the motion doing wonderful things to my cock sliding in and out of her ass almost languidly, and I could keep this up for hours. Well, except for the fact that even my restraint and stamina won't hold out that long, but I wouldn't tease her like that for no reason.

Eventually keeping my position up starts to put uncomfortable strain on my arms and legs so I speed up again. Before long she's moaning into the pillows again, making me grin as I keep molesting her neck.

"I don't want you to come," I finally whisper into her ear, the words making her stop moving immediately as they register. Instead she tenses up, making my next thrust all the more pleasurable for me.

"Not

not at all?" she asks, her voice between breathless and desperate.

"I think that's the common meaning of my words, yes."

Two more thrusts she doesn't physically respond to, and I grip her wrists a little tighter until I hear her utter a soft gasp.

"Will you be my good little slut and obey my order?"

"Yes, Master, I won't come. I won't come!"

She keeps repeating that with a low voice like a mantra while I feel her muscles squeeze me even more, and I wonder just how close to losing that battle she really is. I'm tempted to wait until she actually does so I have a reason to punish her, but my plans for tomorrow don't really fit into that scheme. Taking pity on her I speed up further, continuing to talk to her in a low voice.

"Yeah, keep squeezing like that, milk my cock with your ass! You want me to come fast, don't you? Because if you don't try to make me come I'll keep fucking you until you can't hold out any longer, and trust me, you don't want that to happen."

Her answering moan as much as her attempt to help finally make me come, my face pressed into her hair as I grunt in pleasure. She shudders in return but it doesn't feel like she has actually lost it, and when I finally withdraw and let go of her I catch her rubbing her thighs together stealthily.

"Roll over onto your back and spread those sticky thighs of yours. Let me see how much of a whore you are, all wet from pleasing me."

It takes her a few moments to comply, mainly because she looks as tired as I feel, and when I catch a glimpse of her face the frustration alone satisfies my curiosity. I still run my fingers up and down her legs, then spread her labia and idly flick her clit a few times, loving the way she tries to cringe away from the contact that can make her come any second.

"Still all wound up, I see?"

"Yes, Master."

"You really didn't come?"

"No."

"Good. If you keep being my obedient little whore I might let you come tomorrow."

I can tell that part of her wants to speak up and demand her release but she stays quiet, and eventually manages a smile.

"Thank you, Master."

"You're so welcome."

Snuggling up with her is heaven, at least for me, as I wrap my body around hers and hold her against my chest, maybe a little tighter than usual. It takes her a long time, much longer than usual to eventually relax and for her breath to even out as she falls asleep, and I can't help grinning into the darkness. This is fun, and I intend to find out soon just how much I can keep her hanging until she snaps. Definitely a win-win situation for me as either she shows me her obedience or I get to be even meaner on her when I chastise her, but I know that in the end, she'll reap the benefits of it, too.

After a while I fall asleep, still smiling, content and happy with the woman I love in my arms.

The next morning I sleep in long, at least for my standards, and refuse to acknowledge being awake even when the sun tickles my face. I keep dozing for a while but eventually have to realize that Bella is awake when the bed goes cold and empty next to me. The stress of the last days, both work and relationship related makes me wary to get up, though, so I just stay in bed and enjoy being lazy.

That changes somewhat when I feel the bed dip at my feet, followed by warm skin brushing against mine under the blanket. I'm just about to open my eyes and wish Bella a good morning when her hot, wet mouth slides over my cock, taking in as much as she comfortably can while her fingers wrap around the rest of the shaft and my balls. The words get stuck in my throat and all I can manage is a low moan when she starts sucking me off, expertly manipulating me. Her only reply is a chuckle, the vibrations of which drive me crazy, but of course I don't protest. Instead I relax again and let her fare, eventually bringing one of my hands down to gently tangle my fingers in her hair, but without restricting or guiding her movements.

Coming in her mouth first thing in the morning is a wonderful experience, and once I can think clearly again I wonder if I should ask her to do it more often.

Once she is done cleaning me up Bella smiles at me, then turns her face into the hand previously entangled in her hair and softly kisses the leather wristband similar to her own, before she climbs up the rest of the way to grin into my face.

"Morning."

"A good morning indeed," I reply smiling, then draw her down into a long, passionate kiss.

After that we get up, and while I take a quick shower Bella busies herself with reading through the brochures of the resort and surrounding countryside. Once dressed we leave for the main building to enjoy the breakfast buffet, as usual with such things eating too much so that afterwards we're stuck with lounging in bed and reading until we feel able to move comfortably again.

The weather is cloudy outside but it doesn't look as if it is about to rain any time soon – ideal for my plans. Putting my book down I watch Bella for a little while where she's absentmindedly nibbling on her lower lip, clearly engrossed in her reading material.

"Wanna do something fun?"

"Sure."

She nods but still doesn't look up, inadvertently sealing her fate.

"I think you're wearing way too many clothes for that."

A smile curls up the corner of her mouth, but she keeps ignoring me. That simply won't do.

"Bella?" I pronounce her name very precisely, but she's still oblivious as she flips a page.

"Hm?"

"Strip."

Her finger stops in mid-motion, and finally her eyes zoom to me, flitting over my face to take in my mood. A moment later the book is all but forgotten as she starts shedding her clothes. I take my time admiring her body when she comes to stand naked before me where I sit in the easy chair by the window, letting my eyes roam over my canvas.

"Fetch me the dark blue sports bag from the other room."

She scurries off, soon to return with the few toys I've packed. Taking the bag from her I open it but pay attention that she can't see inside, extracting the long coils of bleached hemp rope. At my nod she turns around, facing away from me, and I get up and start on the knots for the rope harness I intend for her to wear instead of underwear today.

It's a simple yet time and rope consuming tie, and actually the first real bondage I've done with Bella. Finding the middle point of the rope I drape it around her neck that both ends trail to the floor between her breasts, before I tie the two rope ends together at several places that will later span her torso. Checking that I have the distance right I add another five knots for where the rope will be running between her legs, before I stop and regard her levelly.

"Are you still convinced that using a small butt plug is beneath you?"

She hedges for a moment, then nods.

"As you wish."

Bending down to rummage inside the toy bag until I find the medium sized plug, I then tell her to turn around and bend over. Lubing up the plug and her anus alike I make sure that there's enough lubrication that she won't feel uncomfortable later because of the lack thereof I push it into her, taking a little extra time to fuck her with it than strictly necessary. By the time I have her straighten again her cheeks are a little flushed, and her pussy is wet when I pull the knotted rope between her labia and up her back to her neck again where I tie it to the initial loop that started the harness. Once it is complete she won't be able to get rid of the plug herself, and the knots should stimulate her clit and the exterior of her pussy with their rough texture whenever she moves.

I have her raise her arms then and start criss-crossing the two now separated ends of the rope between the front and back parallel starting rope, always going through the intervals between the

knots at her front.

That way I can comfortably encase her whole torso in a visually appealing way that doesn't really restrict her, but should make her hyper aware of every patch of skin covered, and put some light pressure on her breasts where the ropes run above and below them. Finally down at her ass and hips I tie off the rest of the ropes around her thighs, forcing her to keep her legs slightly open at all times.

When I'm done I check some of the connecting knots again, but as there's no real strain on the rope it's not as vital as with suspension. Satisfied with my work I reach for her face and cradling her cheeks in my hands kiss her deeply until I feel her mold her naked and bound body against my fully clothed one.

"I hope you didn't forget the old clothes you don't really wear anymore that I asked you to bring?"

"Of course not, Master."

"Show me, I'll tell you what to wear."

Bella positively glows as she scampers off towards the wardrobe, and soon returns with a small stack of clothes. I look them through critically, then point at a jersey sundress and short cardigan I remember her wearing a lot the summer she hooked up with Mike. That definitely deserves to be ripped to shreds.

"Wear that, and some shoes you can walk in comfortably."

"Socks, too?"

I snort, then kiss her again while I slap her ass hard.

"Smartass. Now hurry up, I expect you kneeling outside on the patio in two minutes."

I wait until she's dressed and outside before I grab what I need from the toy bag and put it in a backpack, together with a comfy pair of sweat pants and sweater from the to be discarded pile, too. She probably thinks I just let her stew outside, which is part of the plan, but I also want her as oblivious as I can get her.

Once I have everything assembled I follow her outside and lock up behind me, before I draw her to her feet and we set out towards one of the trails leading into the wilderness all around us. Striking up a casual conversation I'm inwardly amused to see her struggle with trying to decide how she should act. In the end our banter is nearly as free and unrestrained as always, but she keeps shooting me looks every time her answer falls short of being polite or well versed. I could have told her to just act normally for the time being, but I like that she's working on that adjusting we've been talking about yesterday.

We encounter very few people even on the main path, and then eventually lead her away from that, using one of the many deer trails instead to put a comfortable distance between us and any joggers or other people taking a longer afternoon stroll. I soon find a place that is ideal, and turning to Bella I let her glimpse a hint of the malicious glee running rampant inside of me.

"See that oak over there? Stand against it, your back facing the tree."

She quickly nods and complies, her eyes alight with excitement. I love the way how she keeps looking around, checking if someone can see us, but it seems she's not really concerned about that.

Yet.

"Hands in front of your body."

I set the backpack down and get out more rope, and I can see her eyes go wide when she realizes how many yards of hemp rope I've packed. Using one of the shorter coils I tie her wrists together, then have her raise her arms over her head. The oak is gnarly enough that I find a few knobs in the trunk I can run the ropes over to secure them from slipping down, before I tie both ends of the rope behind the massive tree.

Kneeling down next to her I wrap a generous amount of rope around each of her ankles, then tell her to spread her legs, her heels against the tree, as wide as she can. Bella complies but looks more uncomfortable already when I drag both ropes around the tree and tie them together there. Now she's helpless and at both ends of her body tied to the tree, and not really able to get herself out of the situation unless she intends to yank on the ropes for an extended amount of time. Eventually my slip knots would open, but I don't think we'll need that failsafe.

Picking up another rope from the floor I knot up the middle four inches of it, then turn back to her.

"Open your mouth."

She complies willingly, then lowers her head onto my shoulder so I can tie the ends of the rope gag behind her head. Gathering her hair into an impromptu ponytail I wind the long ends of the rope leading from the gag around it, making sure the knots I place around it don't snag and pull on her long strands. Tugging gently on her hair makes her straighten again, and I can tie the rest of the rope to her wrists, forcing her to either look up or straight ahead, but not onto the floor.

I expect that on some level at least she must have guessed I would do something like that with her, but my next move should surprise her.

"Smile," I tell her, then reach back into the bag and get out the small, portable video camera. Her eyes go very wide and she utters a few grunts around the rope gag caught between her teeth, but I choose not to try to make out the words. Their meaning is clear enough anyway, but I ignore that, too. Walking behind the tree stump a few yards away from the oak I place the camera down on the top, using two small twigs to create an even surface. The angle isn't perfect but then the purpose of that home video is more that she knows now that I'm going to record every single minute of this, not necessarily to use it for later ever. Once she sees the red light come on Bella stops protesting and goes still again, probably reasoning with herself that she can't do anything to prevent this now, and having her mewling on tape might just lead to any kind of punishment later.

Making sure I'm not obstructing the view for the camera I return to her, an evil smirk on my face.

"I love how helpless you are like this. Completely at my mercy, and I can do whatever I want with you."

Stepping closer, I reach for her chest, grabbing and fondling her left tit roughly. She grunts in what sounds like real protest, but there's no fear in her eyes, only a certain level of anger.

"Not really happy right now, are you?"

She shakes her head as much as she dares with her hair tied to her wrists, her gaze for a moment pleading, until I twist her nipple cruelly through the fabric of the dress. Pain clouds her gaze for a moment, then she's back to glaring at me again. Next she tries to jerk on the bonds holding her feet apart and tied to the tree, but there is virtually no slack in the ropes, and she gives up after a few moments.

"You can stop struggling right here, you're only getting out of that if I set you free. And there's no one else here to help you, either. You're mine, and I intend to make the best of that. Not necessarily the best for you, though."

I see her swallow hard at my laugh, then her eyes go wide when I grab the faded blue fabric of the dress over her chest and tear, managing to rip it a good six inches on the first attempt. Leering into her eyes I hook my fingers into the ruined fabric and keep tearing, jostling her body hard in the process. With every rough pull the garment falls away further, revealing her creamy, rope adorned flesh to me. A last harder jerk and I'm done ripping the front completely, prompting her to utter a partly frightened, partly defiant sound.

Yanking the fabric aside I bare her fully to my gaze, before I bend down and catch first one of her nipples, then the other between my lips, licking and sucking on them until they start puckering up. Then I turn my attention back to the ruined dress and light jacket and keep on ripping it to shreds.

Before long she's completely naked except for the shoes – and socks –

with the torn fabric littering the floor around the tree. I step a little to the side so that her whole body is in the center focus of the camera, then start fondling her tits again, squeezing them roughly until I see the first fingerprint sized patches stay on the skin. I want her to carry away a few bruises from our adventure in the woods, and if she really wants to take things to the next level she'll better not complain later.

Satisfied with the soft sounds she keeps making I let my hand move lower, over the ropes that cover her sex. First I pluck at them, then when I'm satisfied that they don't really move I cup her pussy and rub over the knots, stimulating her clit that way. Bella's eyes roll back in her head for a moment and she moans, but the sound cuts off when I laugh at her tauntingly.

"So soaking wet already, looks like you're really enjoying this."

She's back to glaring at me then, and just for fun I slap her thigh hard a few times. Her teeth sink deeper into the rope of the gag but she doesn't even grunt, and that simply won't do. Stepping away

from her I cast a quick look around, but in the end walk back to the backpack to get the leather flogger I've packed instead. I can always spice things up later.

Bella knows the impact toy well, it's one of the heavier floggers that leave a thudding rather than stinging sensation, and I usually only use it on her juicy ass. Seeing me approach her now with my intent clear on my face turns most of her defiance into unease, but except for closing her eyes when she sees me take the first swing she doesn't protest.

Even though the flogger can inflict quite a lot of pain I start slow and relatively gentle as I hit her outer thighs, taking away her anxiety while I go through the warm-up. After a while I see her relax, and even when I let my aim stray to her stomach and soft inner thighs she doesn't seem frightened anymore. Apprehensive, yes, because she must know I will not keep it to slow and gentler strokes, but as with so many things, the actual sensation is obviously more pleasant for her than painful.

After a few minutes of that I stop to tease her nipples a little more and rub her pussy through the rope knots, before I return to flogging her – now also hitting her breasts a few times. It seems to be an acquired taste as the first lighter strokes make her squeal and tense, but once the hits turn steady and a little harder she stops protesting. Varying my aim further I do a good job reddening most of the exposed parts of her body, in the end mostly centered on her tits and inner thighs. I'm pleasantly surprised how well she's responding, and the moment I return to masturbating her, I am rewarded with a very nice lusty moan from her.

Time for phase two.

After making sure that the circulation in her fingers is still well – they are rosy and warm, so no concern there – I pick up the tatters of her dress and tear off a long chunk. She gives a soft sound of protest when I wind it around her head, making sure that while not cast in darkness, she can't see anything, the fabric covering her face from the hairline down to her nose. To test if she's really properly blindfolded I make as if to slap her face, but I know she can't see anything when she doesn't even tense up, let alone shy away.

Satisfied I twist her nipples one last time before I pick up the flogger again to add a few even harder strokes on her tits. Bella shrieks at the first two, then clearly tries to fight the urge to make a sound, but she fails miserably.

"Don't worry, no one can hear you out here," I taunt her, then add a slap with my open hand on her left breast. "But I love to hear you scream.

Makes my cock even harder. Don't you want to make me happy?"

Her grunt is partly defiant so I slap her other tit for good measure, too. The way my hand print stays visible for a second even over the reddened patches from the flogging is mesmerizing, so I do it again, and again. That only seems to feed her resistance as I can barely hear her gasp from the pain. But I want to hear those delicious sounds, and won't stop until I get her to utter them.

When ten more hard slaps on her tits don't accomplish my goal I reconsider my tactic, then grab her

breasts around the nipples and aureoles – and pull upwards. She gasps, then tries to push her whole body with the motion as she rises onto the balls of her feet, so I take a step back from her, forcing her tits to extend in a direction she can't follow. And then I just hold still there and wait.

At first I only hear her heavy, fast breathing, but as the seconds tick by a pained whimper becomes audible. It actually takes an added twist of her extended tits that breaks her stubbornness, and finally she gives in and screams. Not one of those stunted, partly swallowed sounds, either, but a real, agony laced shout that's as much of a turn-on as it's frightening.

I let go of her after three seconds that must be endless to her, then listen with satisfaction as she falls silent, but only to add a few sobs and sniffles to her calming breathing. She definitely deserves a small reward for toughing that out so I move close and stroke her tits gently, although at first the contact makes her cringe anyway. That changes a little when she feels me lap and suck on her tormented nipples, while my other hand is back to rubbing her clit through the ropes.

All the while I listen closely to the sounds she makes – even hampered with the gag she can easily use her safeword if she wants to – but with the immediate sharp pain gone she looks ready to go on. Seeing her covered in rope with her skin red and a few marks that might turn into faint bruises later is a huge turn-on for me, and I have to get a grip on myself not to untie her feet and fuck her right away, but I'm not there yet. Instead I kiss her neck where I can reach it, and also her mouth over the gag, feeling her try to respond in kind. Grinning at her I let go of her again, but stay close enough that she can probably still feel the heat of my body next to hers. I study her for a while, enjoying how she keeps swiveling her hips slightly to increase the friction of the rope over her sex, and how hot she looks, helpless that she is.

And then I turn around, and making as much noise as possible without seeming to overdo it, I walk away from her. There's a fallen tree only fifty yards North, that's as far as I go, before I sit down and look back at where I've left her. Moving very carefully I untie my shoes and slip them off, so when I track back to crouch down next to the stump where the camera is resting on I'm barely making a sound.

At first she's still enjoying the fact that I've stopped tormenting her, but then the lack of sound coming from the direction she must have heard me walk off to is starting to have an effect on her. She's writhing in her bonds, her face turned that way as she obviously strains to hear – but there's only the usual sounds of the forest.

Her head whips around when in the distance a twig snaps, then again when a few birds take flight to her left. I'm sure that deep down she knows I won't leave her alone, but she's still uneasy – and as the minutes pass that unease slowly turns into uncomfortable restlessness.

I know I'm a bad, bad man for enjoying this as much as I do, but fucking with her mind like that is even more rewarding than inflicting pain. Before long she starts testing her bonds for real but finds them holding tightly, and her breathing picks up when a hint of panic joins her twitchiness.

I'm just about to take pity in her and reveal my position when I hear the sounds of leaves rustling get louder. Turning in that direction I crane my neck, while I hear Bella gasp softly behind me. The

sounds get louder still, and when the underbrush parts, a yellow colored Golden Retriever struts into our small clearing, its tail wagging as it chases some invisible trail by scent.

A moment I'm torn between the urge to laugh or make sure we're still on our own, but while the dog's bright green collar proclaims it someone's well-kept pet, I'm sure that his keeper must be a far way from us, or else I would have heard them. I still pick up a branch from the ground, less to scare him off and more to keep him away from getting too curious about Bella by playing with him.

The motion attracts the retriever's attention and he wags his tail faster, then barks twice, clearly happy and excited about seeing a fellow playmate in the wilds. Bella utters a cut-off shriek that actually scares the dog, and I have to swallow a laugh that would give me away. Torn between wanting me to throw the stick and investigating the scary albeit scared woman at the tree the dog looks from one of us to the other, before he takes a few hesitant but noisy steps towards her.

"Cody! Cody! Here, boy, come to momma!"

The dog's head whips towards the sound of the faint female voice from the direction whence he came from, but he seems reluctant to leave Bella alone, even more so that now she's writhing in her bonds with new energy while making all kinds of interesting sounds.

Unable to hold back my laugh anymore I whistle at the dog, then move the stick up and down before him.

"Here, fetch!"

He bounds off after the stick and I look over to Bella. She has gone utterly silent and has stopped moving, and I'm sure she would be glaring at me if she could only see me. Still chuckling under my breath I follow the dog and accept the stick he's happy to give up after a little tug-o-war, and two more rounds of playing fetch his owner, a nice elder lady in hiking gear, appears, followed by a friend of hers in similar dress.

"Oh you rascal, here you are! Cody, heel!"

The dog is somewhat unimpressed by the command but when I let him have his stick he trots off with his booty to show off to his owner, and the two elder ladies laugh delightedly.

Then they turn to me.

"Thank you so much for stopping his run for freedom! Normally he's a really well-behaved dog, but I think all the forest around is calling to his long lost inner wolf."

"I think he heard something, he was all tired and docile but suddenly took off."

I just wonder what that might have been, but hide my evil smirk behind a nice smile.

"He probably smelled my lunch or something. At least he made a direct line for the sandwiches."

"Now that sounds more like him, doesn't it?" the woman replies laughing, scratching the dog behind his ear. I guess that's one white lie I can forgive myself as Cody seems content with the attention from wherever it hails from.

"Again, thank you, I hope he didn't disturb you too much?"

"Not at all."

The ladies both smile, then the dog owner extends her hand towards me.

"I'm Adelaide, and this is my friend Gertrude. Nice to meet you."

"Edward," I reply as I shake their hands.

"Are you staying at the resort, too? Because we're kind of lost here and really need someone who can show us the way back."

I'm more than glad to help them, but only as far as explanations go.

"Actually I am. You're just a little off the main road back there, about four hundred yards in this direction, and you can't miss it. Then you turn left and go straight for another two miles."

They seem a little disappointed but then take their leave, but I can hear them chuckle and laugh all the way back to the main path and out of earshot. Making sure to wait until they're really gone I turn around and walk back to Bella, who's still where I've left her, no surprise there.

I can make out her breathing pick up as she hears me come closer, then stop in front of her and just stare at her. She doesn't fidget but her whole body is tense, and after a minute I reach up and yank the blindfold off her face.

Her eyes are a little puffy as she blinks at me and there are tear tracks on her cheeks, yet her gaze is steady as she looks me right in the eye. I prefer her defiance over the panic she could have been in, but that doesn't mean I like seeing it particularly.

"You really thought I'd left you there, all alone."

She doesn't protest which is all the admission I need, and I'm surprised at how hurt I am at that.

"What part about explicit trust did you not get?"

Bella keeps up the glaring match for a few seconds before she looks away, and when she starts trying to speak through the gag I reach up and pull the knotted rope from between her teeth.

"I knew you wouldn't leave me completely alone. But where from should I have known that you were sitting right there in front of me? And then that blasted dog came along, too, and -"

"Just shut up."

Her mouth opens and closes a few times before she wisely keeps her lips sealed, and I can tell it takes her that long to realize that we're still playing.

True, until a short while ago I would have ended the scene here, but as it is I'm not done with her yet. And she just made it worse for herself.

"Anything else you might want to add, slut?"

She shakes her head and looks down between our bodies again after a brief glance at my face, but then she opens her mouth nevertheless.

"I'm sorry, Master, I shouldn't have doubted you. Please -," she swallows thickly, and looks back up again. "Please punish me for not trusting you?"

Her plea quells my anger a little bit, and it seems as if the situation is still salvageable.

"Stay here." Not that she can move, even if she wants to. "Maybe I can think of something else than dragging you back to our cabin by your hair."

I only need to search for a short while to find what I'm looking for – a bunch of nettles. I still hesitate for another second before I return to Bella to grab the rags formerly known as her dress so I can more or less safely grab the plants without ending up burned badly, although having a few itching places on my fingers will be by far less than she's going to get anyway.

Bella's eyes are huge when she sees with what I return to her, and it's kind of amusing to watch her flatten herself against the bark of the tree even before I can come too close.

"This isn't really punishment," I tell her as I shift my grip on the stinging plants so I can aim them better. "It's more a way of hammering that message home. You trust me or we can't play like this. So what will it be, backing down or bearing the brunt of it?"

The way she exhales sounds awfully final, but her voice is strong as she answers.

"Please do your worst."

"Gladly."

I feel nearly exhilarated with glee as I start dragging the nettles across her skin, caressing her softly with them. Bella bites into her lower lip nearly hard enough to draw blood but a silent shudder is all I get out of her, even when I get dangerously close to her pussy as I pay attention to her thighs.

Also tickling her breasts doesn't get much of a reaction beyond her obvious apprehensive tensing, so I decide to take it a step further.

In theory, whipping someone with nettles might sound like a good idea, but they are way too soft to be of much use there. I still give it a try but mostly end up getting them on my own arms as much as on Bella's tits, and eventually accept defeat – on that count.

Steeling myself mentally I untangle the plants from the rags, then grab a handful before I start mashing them all over her breasts. Considering how much they irritate me they must be a bitch to bear for her, but I love the way she tries to cut off the involuntary sounds. Only that it's still not enough for me, and she seems to realize that herself even when I let go of the nettles and grab the pocket knife from my pants.

Of course I could take the time to untie her now to save the rope as it is, but I'm much too impatient – and I still want to fuck her while she's completely restrained. The hemp rope around her left ankle and on her lower stomach gives way easily, but instead of going right for the grand finale I pick up some of the nettles again.

I wait to make the next move until I have her full attention, or rather the weeds do, before I run them down from her navel to her pussy lips. Her loud gasp get me to stop for a second and I make eye contact again, waiting for her to decide whether she wants to utter that single syllable that will make me stop, but she doesn't.

"Raise your leg."

She complies with a whimper of dread, but the fact that she doesn't hesitate tells me that she does indeed trust me. Keeping my motions gentle and deliberate I peel the knotted rope away that's still resting between her labia, smirking at how soaked it is, before I replace it with the nettles. I make sure that they reach from just next to the butt plug up to her clit before I flatten my palm against them and start rubbing her, just as if I'm making her come the usual way.

Sweat is covering her brow and her teeth keep digging into her lip, and after a second or two she gasps out a low "Fuck!" that goes straight to my cock.

"Hurts?" I taunt, grinning at her obvious discomfort.

"Fuck, yes!"

And still her hips jerk forward against my hand, increasing the friction even more. Her pants grow louder with each passing second but she doesn't seem ready to stop, and eventually I shift my grip a little more so that I can push two fingers into her – along with some of the nettles.

"Holy motherfucking shit!"

In spite of myself I start laughing, unable to stop myself, but she seems too far gone by then to really care. She's so incredibly wet that I feel like her juices already dampen the burn of the plants on my skin, but that's very likely just an illusion. I still keep up what I'm doing for another few minutes, delighted how turned on she is while she seems unable to reach that orgasm she's yearning for this way.

When I finally relent and pull my fingers out of her she sags in her bonds but keeps watching me warily as I pluck the remaining nettle leaves from her pussy. Same as on her thighs and tits the skin of her labia is covered in irritated, pimple-like burn marks, but her sensitive flesh is also as puffy as it

only gets when she's really turned on beyond the usual.

I consider looking in the backpack for a condom but then figure that I kind of deserve to get my cock all burned up if I didn't do a good job cleaning her, and I'm too impatient at the moment, anyway. Bella looks a little confused when I hitch her freed leg up over my waist before I shove my cock into her pussy, making her howl with delight.

"I

I thought you said ..." she tries to say, but I cut her off with a rough kiss.

"I think this definitely qualifies as a special occasion."

So I fuck my poor, helpless, tortured sub still tied to the tree, and the inevitable burn of the nettles on my cock only adds to the fucking awesome feeling of it. Too much strain and pain have once again stripped all modesty from her as she keeps cursing and screaming through it all, begging me at the top of her lungs to fuck her harder, and once I deliver that, to let her come.

And because I'm not a completely cruel bastard, I finally let her orgasm right before I climax myself, reveling in the sensations she pulls me through.

After I feel secure enough on my own feet so I can support her I cut through more of the rope, too tired to care much for salvaging some, until I can draw her away from the tree and cradle her in my arms. She's sobbing a little but mostly from sensual overload, and eventually she calms down enough to whisper a raspy "I love you" into my ear. Hugging her closer I assure her that the feeling is mutual, while I can't stop grinning because I'm so proud of her and happy to call her my own.

Eventually I help her get up and hand her the clothes I've brought, and she doesn't even bat an eyelash at them. While she dresses slowly I gather up all evidence of our deviant behavior, before I take her hand and lead her back to the main path. As she doesn't complain about the butt plug I leave it inside of her, and mentally make a note that yes, she's been right, and won't need the small one anymore.

Back at the cabin I get a few reproachful looks from her while she's busy doing some thorough damage assessment, but I simply can't feel bad about the bruises and whip marks next to some rope burn on her wrists that remain. The only thing she doesn't complain about are all the nettle burns that liberally cover her body, but that's probably due to the fact that on the way back to the cabin she has kept rubbing her thighs together whenever she thought I'm not looking.

I don't apologize for anything and I don't think she expects it, either, but we spend the rest of the afternoon either soaking in the hot tub or screwing around all over the hard spaces inside the cabin, as quite frankly, nettle burns *itch* and we quickly reach a silent agreement just how to scratch that the best way. And because it's still under *special circumstances* Bella isn't too sore by the time we go over to the main building again to enjoy a late dinner.

The evening passes in relative quiet and comfortable ease, until we run into Adelaide, Gertrude and Cody just as we leave the restaurant as they return from a last evening stroll. I can barely wish them a

good night before I start laughing, mostly as Bella turns a deep shade of red that could have rivaled a lobster. I'm sure eventually I will pay for that in one way or another, but right then, life can't get better.

Chapter 21

As the last days of warm weather give way to true autumn, a comfortable routine settles between us. Both Bella and I have to work a lot, which cuts harshly into our precious free time we can spend together, but we manage to work around irregular schedules and endless shifts as good as we can.

But even though lack of sleep and having to deal with an abundance of stupid people should hamper our mood I feel as happy as never before, and every time I swoop her up in my arms and see her radiant smile, I know that she feels the same. Nothing can really reach us, nothing can hurt us, as long as we just have each other, that's all that counts.

The same as sometimes negative things seem to pile on each other, at least I go through a spell of the little issues and problems taking care of themselves. At work, Amanda gives me hell for two weeks for pretending to be sick so I could take the weekend off for our stay at the cabin, but that also means that she forces to me live up to my full potential. Every time she busts my ass for something I know I'm learning to be a better surgeon, and every once in a while I even get a thumbs up from her - something I never see her give anyone else. I know some of the others are jealous of the bond forming between my mentor and me, but only as far as her scarce praise goes. Unsurprisingly enough, they never envy me when she drags me back into the OR only thirty minutes after I get a chance to sneak off to catch some sleep.

But things are also picking up on a personal scale. With the worst hustle of Fashion Week behind her, Alice and I finally get a chance to meet - and reconnect, at least to a certain extent. Things have changed between Alice and me over the last months, and not just the immediate shift after the whole mess. Our friendship hasn't exactly become strained, but a lot of the ease has disappeared. I've known her since Junior High, she has been my confidante through all those years, and I miss her, even when I know I can't talk about everything with her and part of me feels she should just get over herself.

Alice and I have never had that ability to just let conversations - and lewd jokes - run between us like Bella and Jasper used to, but I've never felt like I need to watch what I'm saying around her. Particularly with our plus ones that has been all but impossible over the summer, to no small amount because of my animosity towards Jazz, but now I'm feeling like things are picking up a little when Alice and I are sitting over a latte and espresso at her favorite coffee shop. For the first time in ages I feel like there's no reservation between us, and I'm surprised how relieved I'm at that. She keeps chatting on about all the cities she has visited over the last weeks, people she has met, and after that I get her up to speed on hospital gossip.

We laugh and joke and there's not a single awkward moment between us, just as if we have somehow accomplished the feat of setting back the clock to zero between us. No hard feelings, no avoiding of topics, just two old friends enjoying some time together.

I'm insanely relieved and happy, so much so in fact that Bella can't stop laughing when I tell her. It's a good-natured and approving laugh, and while I can see that she's glad Alice and I have finally overcome our problems, I can see from the sad look in her eyes that she's still fighting with herself about what to do with Jasper.

Then, of course, there is Beth. I've avoided her in the week between our scene together and my weekend getaway with Bella, but after that I feel stupid for tip-toeing around her and visit her one afternoon before work.

One thing I've always admired about her is that she doesn't play games, and it only takes us five minutes until I accuse her of acting weirdly at the end of the scene with Bella's crash, the crash that I feel she partly provoked. At least that's what her just walking out and not really reacting to what happened feels like to me.

Beth being Beth, she tells me to get my head out of my ass. Her offhand remark about things 'working out in the end' pretty much affirms my suspicion that she has expected that things would get too much for Bella on a psychological scale, but I can't be cross with her - because she's right.

There's no need for me to dwell on it. I still tell her that I won't play with her again if she ever tries to manipulate me like that again, and that gets me a slap on my back instead of a hurt scowl most women would have given me.

Even though I know I don't have to prove anything to her, her approval still means the world to me. This more than anything else makes me feel like I'm really back in the game, finally myself again.

And hyped like that, it's no wonder that Bella gets to spend a lot more time on her knees over those weeks than she probably ever dared to expect. Of course we still have non-kinky sex, too, but things keep taking a definite turn towards the less gentle side of things more often than not. And while I'm keeping my promise to make her work for it, she definitely gets off on it -

at least mentally. The physical side, now that's a different chapter.

True to my promise, I force myself to provide her with something to work for, too, and not just demand her submission in the playroom. The day I send her to Beth's shop with a veritable shopping list to assemble a small

'tool kit' she can carry with her everywhere I don't think Bella is able to calm down for a single minute. It doesn't seem to get any better the next day when I call her after her lunch break and order her to grab the small vibrator and bring herself to the brink of orgasm three times in a row without coming in the relative safety of a toilet stall - and don't let her come for another four days. Whenever we're in the same room she seems ready to jump me at any minute, and before long I really enjoy keeping her at that terribly horny yet utterly frustrated stage - and when I finally let her have that climax when we're in the playroom and I'm fucking her ass while she's tied up like a neat little package I can tell it all pays off for her, too.

Of course seeing her enjoy herself like that makes me crave to take things a step further - so I do exactly that. Until now all the pushing of her limits that we've done has been on a physical basis. Obviously that also entails the accompanying emotional aspects, but now my goal is a different one - to push her resistance to the point of breaking. I don't set her up for failure -

yet - but I can clearly see that the strain of not being allowed to orgasm is leaving a heavy toll on her. One she seems very eager to pay, but I'm sure that there are moments every day in which she is cursing me. I can sometimes even see that spark of rebellion in her eyes, but I'm surprised that I don't mind, no, in fact, I love seeing that stubborn set to her jaw, that challenge in her eyes - right before she drops to her knees and obediently sucks my cock. Before defiance in my subs has been something that has rubbed me the wrong way, but with her it's different. Every time she swallows her anger and frustration, it's like a small victory for me - because she *chooses* to adhere to the rules, keeps submitting to me, and doesn't wrestle the control back from me that she so willingly hands over.

In the four weeks that pass since our weekend escape from everyday life I feel like the bond between us strengthens immensely. Maybe it's because nothing else stands between us that has to be dealt with, or maybe it's the fact that even though we have less time to actually spend together, we're constantly on each other's mind. Both of us are pushing into new ground here, experience this together, and I love the added strength, security and confidence that instills in both of us.

It's a late Wednesday evening when we finally have the chance to spend some time together again, just the two of us with no one demanding our attention or work getting in the way. Outside it has been raining for the better part of the day, and I'm just happy to stay at home. We cook dinner together, no small endeavor as I'm more interesting in snacking on Bella's neck than cutting vegetables or stirring the sauce, but she eventually still manages to produce a delectable meal. After we enjoy the rich pasta with a glass of red wine we retreat to the couch to watch TV, but I don't even get to see the news because Bella is very intent on getting her hands into and me out of my clothes at the same time.

She isn't exactly demanding as she's busy giving me a blowjob, but I can tell that the frustration is slowly driving her insane when all I do is lightly rub my fingers over her still fabric covered pussy where she's crouching next to me on the couch. It has been eleven days since I let her come last, stealing at least twenty orgasms from her in the meantime, and I'm surprised she hasn't outright demanded to come yet - or succumbed to begging for it. But when I finally come in her mouth, pretending to leave it at just that tonight, and catch her dejected look, I decide that I've been teasing her long enough.

Leaning over her I kiss her long and deep while my hand is idly stroking her thigh - probably driving her crazy in itself - I savor the moment, before I let my lips drift to her neck. I can feel her sigh more than hear it before she relaxes into my touch, probably telling herself that she can hold out one more day - before I whisper into her ear.

"Get me the lube and some towels, will you?"

The way she's tensing I'm surprised she doesn't explode right out of the plush cushions, and when I pull back enough to see her face, I have to grin at the radiant smile greeting me. The temptation is there to leave her hanging again, but I'm not that cruel. Not if she doesn't royally mess up, that is.

"Like, here?"

"Yes, here, or else I would have told you to bring them into the playroom, wouldn't I?"

"Of course," she yips, then she's off running to fetch the required items, leaving me to wonder if she has deliberately left out acknowledging that order or not. As it is, she seems mostly giddy rather than defiant so I guess she didn't do it deliberately, although that's no excuse.

I'm halfway convinced I should teach her a lesson after all when she returns, but the way she drops to her knees, eyes downcast as she offers me the stack of fluffy towels with the bottle of lube sitting on top pacifies me somewhat again. I decide that one last time I will let things slide, but if she keeps this up I will have to teach her a lesson soon.

I take the stack from her and scoot from my usual place at the bend of the ll-shaped couch to the longer side, spreading the towels on my previously occupied seat.

"You're wearing way too many clothes," I remark dryly, and before I can blink she's on her feet, yanking on her jeans and blouse.

"Yes, Master," she still manages to huff out between shedding the layers of fabric. I'm amused to see that she isn't wearing any panties but her new dark red butt plug, a medium sized toy consisting of three tapered segments, each larger in circumference than the one before, instead of a smooth, bulled shaped one.

"I see you've been a good girl," I remark, earning another smile from her.

"I'm always trying to be a good girl, Master."

"Hardly" I grunt, then add with a smirk, "or else I wouldn't have so much need to paint your ass with red stripes. Now up with you onto the couch, on your knees, arms on the backrest."

She follows suit, assuming position with her knees spread wide, her head pillowed on her elevated arms. I idly drum my fingers over the base of the plug until a soft moan escapes her, before I extricate the toy and fuck her ass slowly with it. As the tapered segments slide in and out of her her relaxed muscles adjust to the motion, and before long I feel even the slight resistance disappear. Thus satisfied I remove the plug and put it down on the towels, then squirt a generous amount of lube over her anus and the fingers of my left hand.

Two fingers easily slide into her, and after wriggling and spreading them a little I add a third. Bella keeps still for the most part but when I speed up my ministrations her hips start pushing back against my hand, adding to the friction, and I love the way her soft moans and sighs float through the room.

I'm just about to consider adding a forth finger when her cell phone goes off, the annoying ringtone making us both freeze in mid-motion.

"Sorry," she huffs, her annoyance making me grin, and at my nod she scrambles up to shut off the most offending device without even checking who's been calling. When she sees me nod again she does the same with mine, although I'm sure she just shuts off the sound, not the whole phone.

Working at a hospital has some drawbacks, after all.

She looks properly apologetic when she settles back onto the sofa but I don't chide her, instead resume where we've left off before the interruption.

Maybe a little faster and less gentle than before, but she doesn't seem to mind, at least judging from how wet she is as I discover with my free hand.

I keep skimming my fingers over the less sensitive parts of her pussy until she starts bucking in an attempt to get them to slip where she needs them.

"Please!" she eventually moans.

"Please what?"

I'm expecting that she will plead for me to rub her clit now, but she surprises me.

"Please let me turn around, Master? I'd really like to look at you while you keep fucking my ass."

"Sure, roll over."

Her motions are lithe as she changes position, more lying than sitting in the corner as she props her ass up near the edge, her heels digging into the cushions. A prod at her ankle is enough for her to scoot forward even more before she raises her legs, holding them spread and pulled back with her hands around the back of her knees.

I offer her a lopsided grin as I push my fingers back into her ass, and I have to admit, being able to see her look of need and lust in her eyes is worth the change. Soon her eyes drift close while her face contorts as she starts to fight for control, but I have no intention of easing up on her.

Stopping for a moment I try to add a forth finger, but while I can work it past her sphincter I can tell that the added intrusion will take her a while to relax around, and I'm too impatient for that right now. So instead I thrust the same three fingers of my other hand into her cunt.

Bella gasps as her eyes fly open, but I don't give her a second to adjust, and go right back to a fast, deep rhythm. I'm sure that if I add any other kind of stimulus, like rub her clit, she'd come this very second, but the past weeks have helped further her control. I can tell that she's fighting hard to keep her hips still not to further play into my hands, but the second I concentrate on rubbing her g-spot directly I feel her seize up with what will turn into a climax very soon.

"Don't you dare come without permission, slut!"

Her fingers, previously splayed around her legs, are now bunched into the towels, and her eyes are pleading with me. Still, her lips remain closed, and only a few cut-off gasps leave her throat.

I speed up my motions further, my mind split between letting her climax, and shoving her just that little bit too far to make her fail. Every time my fingers thrust into her in perfect synchronicity I can feel her tense a little further, but as the minutes tick by, my own frustration rises. She *should* be begging to come be now, and her silent defiance is ticking me off.

Bella actually sighs with relief when I suddenly withdraw my fingers, and her reaction surprises me again.

"Don't you want to come that you seem so happy to be left alone?"

Her gaze turns confused at that before her lust crazed mind catches on to the meaning of my words.

"Oh, I desperately need to come, Master, but I'd rather go unsatisfied than disappoint you."

"Really?" I inquire, turning my voice teasing, but she only smiles.

"Yes, really."

"Keep that thought."

Then I push my fingers back into her ass, adding that forth one after two thrusts. I don't taper my motion nor speed down and I feel her bear down hard on my hand, a small gasp of pain, or at least discomfort, my reward.

But she adepts quickly, and before long I feel her relaxing again, even to the point where it doesn't feel like her ass is trying to stop the circulation in my fingers.

"Do you like me fucking your ass with my fingers?"

The look she shoots me is full of challenge, but when she replies her voice is meek and nice.

"A lot, Master."

"Do you think you can come from that alone?"

"Of course, Master."

I pretend to mull over that option while I keep the motion up for a few more seconds, then stop with my fingers as far inside her as I can get them, and spread them a little. I know exactly when discomfort turns into real pain as the light huffs and gasps from before turn harsh all of a sudden, but I still hold that position for another twenty seconds. Her eyes seek mine and capture my gaze, but that's the only thing she does, no pleading for me to stop or ease up on her. Seeing her determination makes me proud of her, and after I'm done counting silently, I let my fingers slide out of her, with only three penetrating her again the next time I push back in.

"Then come."

Although relief clearly floods her she doesn't climax right away, probably because it takes her a few minutes for her subconscious to let her ease up on her control enough for it to happen - only that we don't have those minutes, as just before I feel her go from relaxing to tensing with her climax, the door bell rings.

I stop immediately while Bella utters a loud whine, but I ignore that.

Checking the clock of the TV, I'm surprised who would come to visit us at after eleven in the evening.

"It's probably just someone who got the wrong apartment number!" Bella huffs, and I have to admit, that explanation sounds likely. I'm also reluctant to get up and check, so after a few moments I shrug - and resume my previous attempt to drive her crazy.

The interruption has clearly torn her out of the worst of her lust crazed state, but within a minute or two I have her right at the edge again. Her hips now hump my hand as she knows she doesn't have to hold back any longer and can let go whenever she's ready - at least until the bell goes off again.

Followed by a knock on the door.

Bella's face scrunches up as she lets out a frustrated shout, her head smacking back against the couch, and I start laughing before I can rein in the reaction. That pretty much destroys what little is left of the mood, and when her eyes open her glare is everything but friendly. I know I should remind her of her place in a stern voice now but I can't stop laughing, and it only gets worse when she grabs a pillow and hurls it at me, the motion dislodging my stilled fingers from her ass.

"Oh, you think that's funny?"

"Very," I try myself at a dry retort, and her livid glare only makes me crack up again.

She's on her feet and yanking on her clothes before I can do much against it, but before she can reach for her jeans I grab her hips, and none too gently shove the butt plug back into her. Well prepared as she is I'm sure it's not even uncomfortable but she gives a surprised yip that sends me into more fits of laughter, and I note to myself that yes, I do deserve the thump onto my shoulder I get for it. The door bell rings once more, making me laugh hard enough that I have trouble breathing and she is able to get out of my grip, finally yanking up her pants.

Watching her stomp towards the door, her face still flushed with exertion, her hair mussed while her fingers are clenched into fists I hear her mutter a lethal, "This better be important or I'm so gonna shove my hand up someone's ass!" as she rounds the table. I get up myself while I push the towels together, out of the sight, and vault over the couch to join Bella by the door.

Just as I reach her she yanks the door open, and I see her anger turn to stupefied surprise instantly.

"What are you doing here?"

It's a valid question, but not the first one that comes to my mind when I see who is standing in the hall outside, drenched from head to toes from the downpour we've mostly ignored so far. In fact, judging from his overnight bag and backpack I can kind of venture a guess just what Jazz is doing on our doorstep at this hour of the day.

"What's wrong?"

His light eyes flit from Bella to me, then back again, and finally settle on the floor between our feet. He sighs loudly, and his voice is hoarse and slightly shaky when he answers.

"Alice kicked me out."

Another sigh, and when he looks up, his eyes once again do that ping-pong match between us.

"I know I'm probably the last guy you want crashing on your couch, but I literally have nowhere else to turn to."

My brain is a little sluggish to catch on - and parts of it seem to be stuck in Bella's ass stilll- because I haven't even started to formulate an answer when Bella opens her mouth.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course you can stay with us."

Her words tear me out of my stupor, and it's foremost elation that I feel- not about him staying, I'm kind of indifferent about that, but just the fact that her struggle with herself from a few weeks ago seems to be a thing of the past.

She still looks a little hesitant when she glances over to me, though, and I can see that she's starting to regret blurting that invitation out before asking me, yet her words pretty much sum up what I would eventually have come up with myself. And finally my brain kicks into gears again

"Come on in. I'll get the spare blankets from upstairs."

I don't know why I feel like giving them a few minutes of privacy - probably because Jazz looks ready to break down any moment and I don't think he'll appreciate me hanging around for that - but I head upstairs while I grab my phone in passing. I have to admit, my stomach feels a little queasy the longer my mind has to mull over the situation, but just as Bella is quick to overcome any resentments when her friend needs her, I feel like I'm obliged to do the very same. And all things considered, he still *is* my friend.

Only why it takes me three whole minutes to dial Alice's number is beyond me - she is my friend, and I'm sure that whatever happened between them must have left her a mess - although I get my answer seconds after she picks up.

"Edward? Why are you calling at this ungodly hour, is something wrong?"

Irritation and surprise are warring inside me, and I'm barely able to stop myself from asking her what the fuck is going on. But it's kind of obvious.

No tears in her voice, not even a sniffle, as if there isn't a good reason why I would want to call her dripping all over my living room.

"Ah, nothing, I just remembered I wanted to ask you ..." Ask her what? My mind is blank, so I blurt out the first thing I can think of. "There was a change in shifts at the hospital, I won't be able to make our dinner date this week. Do you mind if we, ah, skip it?"

"Of course not, dufus!" she laughs - actually laughs - then I hear her smack her lips. "I don't know how Bella does it, not getting frustrated with your work hours. But nevermind, it's okay."

"Sure, great," I offer lamely, then finally get my shit back together. I know Alice is the queen of denial sometimes, always was, but I know she won't lie to me outright.

"Everything alright with you?"

"Yeah, why shouldn't it be?"

She even sounds normal, not strained or stressed or close to tears, and that's when I realize that I've been wrong. A moment the betrayal hurts but then my emotional defenses come up, and I force myself not to care. I would have taken her side in this, whatever it is, but if she doesn't want my loyalty, I'm not beyond giving Jasper the benefit of the doubt when I listen to his side of things.

"Don't know, it was just a question. Have a nice evening."

"You too!"

Her chipper tone grates, and even after ending the call I stare down at the phone in my hand until the display winks out. A sound behind me makes me look up, and I find Bella teetering at the door, clearly reluctant to enter the room.

"Alice?"

"Yeah."

Even to me my voice sounds flat, and I can see the resulting worry lines appear on Bella's forehead.

"Are you mad? At me, I mean, for telling Jazz he can stay? But he's looking like shit, and outside it's a nightmare and -"

"I'm not mad at you," I assure her, then fold my arms around her when she steps up to where I'm still sitting on the bed. Burying my face in her stomach I inhale her scent, mixed with the unmistakable note of her arousal and the abundance of lube, while I force myself to calm down.

"It's okay," I finally grunt, then turn my head up so she can see the sincerity on my face. "Of course he can stay, he's our friend, if he needs us he can depend on us. If you're okay with him hanging around, that is."

The flash of relief on her face is priceless, although it disappears after a few moments. When she doesn't say anything else I let go of her, then step up to the closet to get the blankets and pillow stored in the upper compartment.

"Come on, let's find out just what's going on. Because I somehow feel like there's more to this than Jazz and Alice just having a minor disagreement."

Bella shrugs, her face carefully blank, as she follows me out of the room, and after my call with Alice, I can't help feel the same undercurrent of resentment she must be trying so hard to hide.

Chapter 22

While I follow Bella downstairs, my arms laden with the spare blanket, my mind starts dissecting what little information it has received over the last minutes. I'm usually not that slow to catch on but compared to Bella I'm downright sluggish in ridding myself of the level of arousal and frustration that has been clogging my thoughts until now.

Maybe she's just more used to that than I am.

My first reaction at Alice's tone and words has been disbelief - and feeling betrayed that she's lying to me. Now the thought occurs to me that she could be telling the truth, that it is all just a new ploy of Jasper's to seed distrust between Bella and me - but what for? From what I know she's steered clear of him for the last few weeks, that more than anything speaking plainly that she's not on the best of terms with him.

And when I see him hunched over on the couch, his fingers bunching up his wet hair, his eyes red while he's obviously fighting not to break into pieces, I know that this is real and not just a show.

Unlike Bella or me, Jazz is good at telling lies and pretending, but not that good. That I fell for his act once all those months ago has been part of why I've been hating myself so much - if I hadn't been so selfish and lost in my own misery I would have seen right through it. I've known him long enough to see the inevitable signs when I look closely enough, and I don't get a fake feeling from him right now.

Alice is another thing entirely. She's usually on the chipper side but to me she's been sounding way too perky, and too fast to deflect my question. Of course I can't be sure by her voice and words alone, but if I have to take a guess, Jazz is not the one putting on a show. And it hurts inexplicably more that Alice would do this to me now that I've been feeling us reconnect at last.

While I busy myself with dumping the duvet on one of the chairs Bella fires up the coffee maker and hunts down a box of cookies. Inwardly that move is cracking me up - while not a perfect homemaker, Bella does have better manners than I will ever have, and guests normally get food served on platters. The fact that she nearly hits Jazz in the head with the cookies when she throws them in the general direction of the couch speaks of a comfortable familiarity acquired by endless years of knowing each other -

that never fully went away, it seems.

I still wait for Bella to sit down next to Jazz before I take my seat on her other side, farthest away from him but not exactly avoiding him. The fact that it's a conscious decision on my part is telling, but I'm happy the others ignore it. And unless I want to perch on the arm rest it's the only comfortable space on the sofa, anyway.

Jazz dumps sugar seemingly at random into his coffee, then drinks it without adding cream. The liquid must be scalding his tongue but he doesn't seem to notice, and he remains silent, his eyes fixed on the table top, until Bella lets out a soft sigh.

"Wanna tell us what happened?"

He looks up and a multitude of emotions run over his face, too fast for me to really make them out - but the openness of it underlines my guess that he isn't playing any games right now.

"What usually happens, I guess. We had a fight, we both said a lot of things that needed out but that we probably never should have given voice to, and then she told me to pack my things and go, and never come back."

Bella frowns, then indicates his overnight bag and the backpack still sitting by the door.

"And that's all?"

"There weren't really that many things of me in her apartment. Left most of it in the storage space."

Where they went after I kicked him out, but he doesn't say that. Doesn't need to, either.

The realization of how little he had over with her strikes me as strange - it can't be more than a few books and some clothes. I try to remember the last time I've been over at Alice's, but I can't think of many personal belongings of his in sight. And suddenly his phrasing - *her* apartment -

registers. It doesn't seem as if it has felt like *theirs* to him for a while to be familiar with the term, casual as his sentence sounds.

Of course I can't really compare our condo here to that as Bella and I have moved in together into the uninhabited space from two separate living units, but even before that there has been the content of three large moving boxes of her stuff at the old house, only a two minutes walk from her studio.

Maybe I'm reading too much into this, but to me it seems as if Jazz has never made an effort to become a permanent fixture in Alice's home - or that she hasn't let him. Either option is just depressing.

"At least it's not all wet now," Bella tries to lighten the mood, but her words sound so hollow, echoing my own sentiments, that she goes on immediately. "Are you hungry? I can whip something up for you quick."

Jazz shakes his head, then stares at the cookies as if they are a bunch of poisonous snakes.

"I'm not hungry, thanks."

Silence falls, becoming awkward fast, and uncomfortable not long after that. I feel like I have to say something, anything, but what can I say that makes a difference?

"You know you can stay here as long as you need to."

My words seem to amaze him as he actually looks up at me, surprise clear in his eyes.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it, but you don't need to get all lost in your pity for me. It's just for a few

days."

The light note of scorn in his voice makes anger rise in me, but before I can get in his face he shakes his head and buries his face in his hands.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it that way, it's just that I can't ... I can't fucking think!"

The sheer helplessness of that outburst dampens my ire again, and I can see that same mixture of sympathy and pain I feel mirrored on Bella's face.

He might not be the most welcome guest in this house, but that doesn't mean we're immune to the despair coming off of him in waves.

Still, on some level I'm not sympathetic with him, I'm even a bit gleeful at all this happening. Feels too much like karma being a vindictive bitch - and for once not kicking my ass but someone else's who might even have deserved it. And it's not like a break-up is the end of the world, something he seems to realize himself, judging by his words.

I might have smirked a little at those thoughts because Bella shoves her elbow into my side where Jazz can't see it, and I try hard not to react. The temptation is there to offer a scathing remark, but I refrain from it, more for her sake than his. Instead I try to steer the conversation into a direction that won't end with either of us biting each other's head off.

"I thought things were okay? I met Alice just a few days ago and she seemed pretty content with how things are."

She also sounded happy and unencumbered just minutes ago on the phone, but I don't add that, nor do I want Bella to know - yet. I'll probably tell her later when it's just the two of us, but she and Alice have never been really close, and I don't want her to lose the last bit of objectivity when she feels she has to throw in her lot with Jasper.

"Well, it was," he replies, but must have realized how insincere he sounds right away as he exhales loudly, leaning back, getting a little more comfortable. Bella in turn snuggles into my side and I pull her closer with my arm around her shoulder, wondering for a moment if our show of comfortably unity is cruel, but Jazz doesn't seem to notice or care.

"It was all okay if you consider the Dictatorship of Alice as something that should shape a relationship between two equals."

I can see Bella biting her lip hard, probably not to blurt out the first thing coming to her mind, so I relieve her of that pressure.

"Got tired of too much Gin, eh?"

Jazz seems surprised that either of us has noticed that - and still remembers - but it's hard to ignore the many instances in which Alice has put her own ideas up for them as a couple.

"Kind of. That and so many other things," he admits. His eyes flit across the room then, taking in everything around us, before they return to Bella and me. He still seems reluctant to look at us while talking, but the tension slowly leaks from his body.

"I know it sounds petty of me, but of late it has felt as if she's deliberately doing everything to show me how much she doesn't care for what I think or like. Really everything. She couldn't even care to pick her stupid clothes off the living room table!"

The clearly offended tone makes me snort even though I'm trying hard not to.

"What, her messiness is a personal offense to you?"

This drags up memories of years of fights over me leaving something lying around, memories that make me smile inside. Jazz has always been somewhat of a neat freak, and we've had real troubles over that. Back in the college dorm room we've shared that got as far as a few fist fights, and when we moved to the house, we've had to divide the space up into clear zones where either I had to pick up after myself immediately, or he was a step away from not being allowed entrance. I've never understood why Bella still finds it so amusing that I as a surgeon can feel comfortable with leaving a trail of junk wherever I go, while keeping the playroom about spotless. But at least she doesn't throw things at me anymore when I drink the orange juice straight from the bottle. Mellowing her down day by day.

I figure Jasper must be thinking long the same lines because he grins for a second, but then the grief swallows that up immediately.

"You have no idea."

"I actually do," Bella chimes in. "Remember, I've had to search my books and notes between her heaps of clothes everywhere for years, too. And I don't think that got any better since college."

He shakes his head.

"Nope. And her designing stuff and all that fabric just make it all a perfect mess. And I can't really say it wasn't organized because she always knew when I touched anything and got in my face immediately. In a way I'm glad she doesn't cook or else it would have been like living in a waste dump."

"She doesn't cook?" Bella echoes lamely, then frowns. "But I know her fridge is well stocked, she's usually dragging me along groceries shopping, griping at every pre-packaged meal I buy."

"Alice only eats non-processed food," Jazz explains, his voice changing from hollow to acerbic again. "And only organic food. And no fat or carbohydrates. Do you have any idea how much I miss noodles? She wouldn't even let me make mac and cheese!"

As if in answer to his own outburst his stomach growls, and Bella allows herself a soft smile.

"I can warm up some left-overs if you want them after all."

He starts to protest that he still isn't hungry, but Bella ignores him, extricating herself from me before she shimmies by Jazz to shorten her way to the fridge.

"I always ask myself, what's more polite, ass or crotch?" he murmurs, then snorts. Bella stops, her fingers wrapped around the handle of the fridge door, and smirks.

"As long as you don't start making soap in my bath tub, I don't give a shit."

"We don't have a bath tub," I chime in, making her laugh.

"Exactly."

Jazz is shaking his head then, clearly still amused, and a hint of the smile remains even when he sobers up.

"But seriously, I feel like I've been living in that flat from the guy from 'Fight Club' for the last months. It's like an alternate version of the Ikea catalogue.

Including those stupid glass stuff."

Getting a blue glass bowl from the cupboard, Bella dumps the contents of the by now hot microwave dish into it and brings it over to Jazz.

"You mean like these wonderful glass dishes with the little imperfections that prove that they were handcrafted by the hard-working indigenous people of where-ever?"

He just groans but accepts the food without another complaint, then starts shoveling down pasta as if he's been starving for weeks. Although technically if that were the case he would already be vomiting, I dryly remark to myself. We both must have been watching him with the same kind of fascination because he suddenly stops and glares at us, before he gives a single guffaw that is probably meant to be a laugh.

"It's good. Great, even. Thanks."

Bella smiles graciously, then, in a nearly idle motion pushes part of a towel sticking out from under a pillow back into hiding.

"Still, can't have been that bad. I mean I know Alice's decorating frenzy, but she's usually getting everything looking good."

"Yeah, but do you really need all these clever things? I mean who really buys a stupid table with a yin-yang symbol on it."

"Me for instance," Bella huffs as she pushes herself into my side again.

"And I still don't see what you have against the congeniality of the Omtyckt place mats, the Husvik lamps, the Pränt box or the Beata Orkide duvet covers."

I can't hold back a loud laugh when I see his horrified expression at her fluently counting off the different items on her fingers.

"Now you're just making that all up."

"Am not," she remarks, turning to me. "Just because you don't speak Ikea doesn't mean I'm just as illiterate."

Jazz and I share a look that can only be described as pained, while Bella goes on.

"But I admit, the Bredgrund shower curtain might have been a little too much even for Alice."

There's nothing either of us feels can be said to that, and Bella drops the topic after a moment, clearly pleased with herself.

"But seriously, neither Ikea Wonderland nor her leaving her stuff strewn all over the apartment can be the reason why you broke up."

"Of course not," Jasper admits, then puts the empty bowl back onto the table. "It's all taken together. She just," he sighs and lets the words drift off, then finally resumes. "It's as if she simply couldn't bear to let me decide anything, even for myself. You have no idea how furious she got when I told her I quit my job last week."

"Wait, you quit your job?" I ask, surprised, at the same time as Bella chimes in, "Didn't you want to wait till after Christmas?"

"You knew about this?" I go on to her when it's obvious that she did. Bella shrugs, and for a moment she looks uncomfortable before defiance makes her straighten her back.

"Yes, I knew that Jazz thought about quitting his job. And you would have, too, if you hadn't been acting like an ass around him all summer long."

The resulting silence is deafening, and even without him in the room I'm not sure if I would have known what to reply. As it is I keep it to glaring at her, although I have to admit that I'm more angry with myself than with her - and she's right, of course, which doesn't really help.

"Actually it's been a very recent development," Jazz tries to diffuse the situation, wise enough not to take sides in the silent argument between me and my girlfriend. "I mean I've been thinking about quitting for months, but they kicked out another thirty people and cut our salaries, and I figured before I earn minimal wages for a shitty job I'm better off trying my luck elsewhere. I've recently met two of my buds from college, and we've been talking about opening our own business together, and that last week was kind of the incentive I needed to throw my lot in with them. And am now in the lucky position that unless we get a few projects soon I'm pretty much completely broke."

Which explains why he has shown up here instead of getting a hotel room -

besides the obvious comfort he must be seeking. Sometimes being able to just talk to someone is

worth more than a fat paycheck.

"What exactly do you plan to do with that business?"

He shrugs at my question.

"Pretty much whatever we can get, at the moment. Barry's planning to get us a shot at outsourced project planning, but I'd be happy with a few web design jobs, too."

I hesitate for a moment, but then speak what comes to my mind nevertheless.

"I know Beth is thinking about getting a new software for the online part of her shops, and the hospital homepage is so antiquated that I think we could actually be losing patients because of it. If you want to, I can ask around if they wanna get back for an offer from you."

Both Bella and Jazz seem surprised at my suggestions, and I can't help chuckle at the faces they are making.

"What?"

"Nothing," Bella huffs, then smiles. "I think that's a great idea. Don't you, Jazz?"

"Sure, thanks, that would be great if you could do that."

"You're welcome."

The idea that Jazz of all people could get to manage the part of Beth's website that deals with the non-standard sex shop items is rather amusing, but I keep that to myself. Money is money, and it's not like he doesn't know about it all. And except for me - and by extension, Bella - he never seemed to have a problem with anything kinky. Thinking of that dampens my mood considerably, but before the heavy silence can get worse, Bella again rides to the rescue.

"Anyway, maybe it was for the best that you had that fight? She probably didn't realize she was leaving you no freedom at all, and now that that's out in the open you can work on making it better from now on?"

"I don't really think that there's a chance of us staying together," he admits.

Both Bella and I are waiting for him to elaborate but he doesn't.

"Why?"

He shrugs at Bella's question, then for the first time really looks at us.

"Because I've never heard her say anything with so much hate and loathing in her voice. She wasn't just furious when she kicked me out, she calmed down right around the middle of our argument, and I could tell that she really believed what she was saying. She doesn't want me in her life anymore, not

as her partner, nor lover, nor even as a friend. And the really sad thing is, I never saw it coming. Yes, it was clear we'd have to work out the small issues like the stupid food or her messiness, but whatever made her snap is routed way deeper. And nothing can change anything about the fact that I still love her, while she obviously doesn't feel the same for me."

There's nothing either of us can say to that, and Jazz lets his head fall into his hands again. Bella hesitates, but then reaches over and squeezes his shoulder, some of the pain so heavy in his words now on her face.

"It's gonna be okay," she murmurs, but there's not much conviction behind it, and she falls silent when she realizes that herself. We stay like that for another few minutes, but I can tell that Jazz is at the end of whatever strength is still left in him, so I gently nudge Bella to get up.

"I think we all need to catch some sleep, it's late."

Jazz nods, clearly relieved, then glances at his bag.

"Sure."

While he's busy in the downstairs toilet brushing his teeth over the small sink I stealthily extract the towels while Bella sets up the makeshift bed, and we go upstairs after wishing Jazz a good night. I don't think he will be sleeping all that much, and judging from the way Bella keeps tossing and turning next to me it doesn't look any different for either of us.

"Wanna fuck?"

Just as I've intended that makes her go still, and after a few seconds she glances over her shoulder at me.

"Oh, Edward, you're so romantic, please let's elope to Vegas and marry and have ten children in our white picket fence house!"

Grinning, I pull her closer until I'm pretty much keeping her immobilized with my body cocooned around hers while pretending to just cuddle with her.

She laughs and rubs her ass suggestively against my cock, but it seems more like teasing than real need. I even think I can get hard eventually if she keeps that up, but she stops soon, her loud sigh deafening in the silence of the room.

"This whole mess with Jazz and Alice is just too depressing. And I can't believe I'm saying this after how our evening has started, but I really don't want to have sex right now."

I kiss her neck softly in answer, then let my hold around her go slack. She still stays where she is, accepting the warmth and physical comfort I offer.

"They're not gonna resolve this, you know?" she finally speaks out the words we both know to be true.

"No, don't think so."

I feel her nod her own agreement.

"What did she say when you called her earlier?"

"Nothing."

Bella tenses a little.

"Like she won't say anything about their break-up?"

"No, as in nothing has happened. Everything's okay."

Her silence is telling, and I'm sure that if I could see her face I would find a frown knitting up her brows.

"You think he could be lying?"

The answer is easy.

"No."

"Huh," she grunts, and when I nudge her to go on, she finally turns around, searching my face for something. "I would have thought you'd assume he was if Alice told you she knew about nothing."

"I didn't ask her if they split up, just if anything was wrong. And she said no, everything is okay. Maybe it is, in the way of now it is okay?"

It's obvious Bella wants to add a few choice words to that assessment, but she doesn't. The following silence isn't uncomfortable as I just feel so close to her with the way she keeps looking at me, like we're both thinking the same things and don't really need to say it out loud for the other to know.

"Nothing we can really do about it, I guess."

"No," I agree. "Just be the friends they need us to be. And if they don't need us, well, then not."

Thinking that is one thing, but speaking it out loud makes me grow cold inside. It's as if Alice has shut that door between us once again, and the only thing I'm really surprised about is how easily I can accept that. I don't like it, even hate it, but there's nothing I can do about that, either.

"Maybe she just needs time. You know, I don't think Alice ever really had to deal with something that didn't go the way she wanted it to go. She never had to deal with herself and how she reacts in such a situation. Maybe that's all just that outburst that needed to happen for ages and she's shutting everyone out until she can work through it. People sometimes do stupid things in situations like that. Like propose to you or something."

I smile at Bella's last remark, and in return she raises one hand to stroke my cheek softly.

"Yeah, who would ever do something like that?"

"Someone really desperate. And I have to admit, I'm not sure if I wouldn't have acted that much different than her if I hadn't run off and got some time to collect my thoughts and straighten out my priorities before I saw you again. As much as I want to call her a stupid bitch, in a way I can understand her. I just don't get what's been festering so badly that it made her explode like that."

I know I'm a man of many faults, but lying to myself has never been one of them. I guess that's the reason why I don't really understand her sympathy with Alice, but I'm happy to just accept that as a fact and not dwell on it.

"I'm the wrong guy to ask about that. All this hit me as out of the blue as you."

"Except for the part where it was obvious from the cunt she's been acting like whenever it was the four of us out together that this all had to blow up in their faces eventually."

I mull that over in my thoughts, and while I have to admit that I wouldn't have phrased it like that, Bella does have a point.

"Maybe."

"Or he's a way better actor than either of us gives him credit for," Bella jokes, but her eyes hold more doubt than I feel over his motives.

"You think? Because if that's the case we should nominate him for an Academy Award."

Now it's her turn to seem surprised, but she gets over that quickly.

"Maybe I'm just wanting him to be lying. But to me it feels like there's so much more to this than he told us."

"Well, he didn't really tell us anything, except that she kicked him out and things weren't going as well as they should have."

"True," she admits, but the frown remains on her face. Then the set of her jaw turns stubborn, or at least determined, and her eyes remain fixed on mine.

"Something like that can't happen to us, right? You wouldn't just eat something up and let it fester and grow until it's unsolvable?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Promise me."

I'm a little miffed that she needs that reassurance, but I can see how important it is for her, so I indulge

her.

"I promise, I will never keep anything from you that could turn into such a disaster. Even if I know it will hurt you, I will tell you and be completely honest with you, because I know in the end, it will hurt a lot less than when it all comes out later in a fight. And I know you'll do the same."

She nods, still serious, but then a smile spreads on her face.

"Speaking of things that might become a problem ..."

"Yes?"

Her gaze turns downright shrewd.

"If it's getting over fourteen days I'm so gonna safeword my ass out of this hellhole of frustration and fuck myself raw on your cock! Just so you know!"

Her words - and also her forceful sincerity - make me laugh, to the point where she's a step away from being offended.

"I really mean it!"

"I know you do," I reply, then give her the most stern look I can manage, which is probably still more playful than fierce. "I knew all that compliance and meekness couldn't last that long."

Bella huffs but can't hide a hint of chagrin at having gotten caught.

"So what, I'm selfish, I need to come eventually! This whole spiel wouldn't work if I could just go on living in frustration forever!"

"That would just be boring," I admit, then lean down to kiss her roughly.

"Tomorrow evening, seven sharp, I expect you kneeling in the playroom, and you better be asking me to punish you for that little diatribe just now."

She laughs into my mouth, not even in the least bit frightened.

"I'd love to, but you know we can't."

"Says who?"

"Says that card over there on the dresser. Or have you already forgotten our appointment?"

I actually have, with all that drama that our guest has brought with him, but now I know again why I've wanted to make sure that she won't go to bed unsatisfied again tonight.

"Shit, that's tomorrow?"

Bella laughs, then lightly kisses my throat, her lips vibrating with her chuckle.

"Yes, tomorrow. Or are you getting cold feet?"

"Nope, just forgot."

"So, no playroom fun at seven?"

"Doesn't look like it, no."

"Too bad," she retorts, her laugh leaving me guessing if she's really relieved or also disappointed in parts. Then she turns over so that her back is once again pressed against my chest, and before long I can hear her breath even out as she falls asleep.

No playtime, as it seems, because tomorrow my beautiful girlfriend and I are going to get inked.

Chapter 23

There's one thing I've never expected I will think of myself - that I'm a wimp.

But today I'm obviously proven wrong.

It all starts pretty relaxed - we've been to the tattoo studio twice before to see the artists' works firsthand and talk about our designs. While Bella has been fussing over hers together with Mandy, the owner's daughter who Bella instantly connected with, I've decided to pretty much wing it. Carlos, the owner himself, is an acclaimed free hand artist, and I trust him to get the dragon on the canvas of my left upper arm right.

It's weird how downright giddy I feel, but for obvious reasons I can't be as exuberant about it as Bella is - at breakfast she's been pretty much unable to concentrate on anything else, and when we meet up at the tattoo studio after work she seems a step away from squealing with delight. I still wonder if part of it is due to Jazz not hanging around, as he chooses to go running instead of eating with us.

As she and Mandy have the design all planned and already drawn up, the stencil is quickly transferred to Bella's right shoulder over her shoulder blade, and after a last check that everything is where it belongs, Mandy sets to work. Bella barely winces as she remains hunched over her chair, looking serene and nearly relaxed except for the constant chatter going on between her and the woman wielding the tattoo gun. She has decided to get a heavily shaded Calla lily, no extra colors added, but the outline alone promises to yield a stunning, elegant flower to soon bloom on her back.

Meanwhile Carlos is busy sketching the dragon on my arm, and we don't really talk that much - then again I get the impression he's equally amused about Bella and his daughter giggling and laughing away like old friends, and I don't feel like breaking his concentration. It's fascinating to watch him draw a few lines that seem only like a natural emphasis of my muscles at first, then keep building up on them until I have a red penciled fierce predator curled around itself all over the outside of my arm, from the shoulder down to nearly my elbow.

"About what you had in mind?" Carlos asks, and I nod.

"Even better. Let's do this."

When he starts mixing the colors I'm still somewhat calm, but from the moment he turns on the tattoo gun, I feel my cool slipping away. And damn, that stuff is *uncomfortable*.

At first I try telling myself that the feeling will pass - after all it's quite ridiculous that I of all people should have problems with a little pain - but it doesn't. In fact it only gets worse when he moves up from the fleshier part of my arm to the bones at the shoulder, and I feel myself break out in cold sweat all over. For half an hour that goes mostly unnoticed, until Bella asks Mandy to take a break because she has to use the restroom - and when she returns and looks over to us to check the progress, she gives a strangled guffaw that doesn't sit well at all with my ego.

"Everything alright with you?" she asks, her voice unable to hide the laughter she tries to hold back, and at her words Mandy of course turns to us, too. Her critical gaze rakes me, then she shrugs.

"Maybe you should take a break. Eat and drink something, you'll feel better in a few minutes."

Carlos stops after finishing the next line, then glances at my face.

"Dude, you really are pale."

"I'm fine," I hiss between clenched teeth, then give up when I realize just how ridiculous I'm acting. Bella bats her lashes at me as she sits down again, then ignores my glare when she resumes their chat with, "You know, normally he's not such a wuss."

Oh girl, you've got it comin'!

Carlos is nice enough to pretend he needs to call another client when I'm done juggling down a can of coke so I get a little more respite. When we resume our session I'm still not exactly enjoying myself but the discomfort is more tolerable; seeing the tattoo slowly come to life on my arm is helping a lot, too, and I can't help thinking that it would still be worth it even if it hurt ten times as much.

With the head start they've had from Bella's tattoo being completely planned already when we got here, and the whole piece being smaller than my dragon, it's no surprise Mandy is done long before her father. After giving Bella a short respite Carlos and Mandy switch places to include the parts Bella and I have agreed on before - a stylized black dragon soon circles the stem of her lily, while my half-finished dragon clutches a lily in the talons of his left front leg. Each of us will now bear a part of the other with us, wherever we go, come what may.

Once Carlos takes over again, Mandy and Bella leave the room, the tattoo artist murmuring something about showing her the rest of the studio. There are no other customers left as it's very close to closing time already, and to me at least it seems as if Mandy is aching for a smoke.

Finally on our own Carlos clears his throat, then chuckles softly.

"It's usually the slight girls who are the toughest. Don't let her get to you, you're handling this well. Just last week I've had to stop after twenty minutes because a guy couldn't handle it anymore. Not a problem, we all have our good and bad days."

I try to take that with the humor the situation deserves, but my ego is still bruised.

"Sure. But it's a little embarrassing."

He gives a noncommittal grunt before he sets to switching colors one last time, adding green highlights to the blue scaled beast.

"Guess that depends. You one of the guys who can't handle his girl being better at anything than him?"

"Oh, I know she's better than me in pretty much everything."

"But?"

"I'm not used to being the squeamish one."

Carlos seems to weigh my words as he cleans up some of the residual ink.

The tissue halts for a moment at the faint scar close to my elbow, right next to the lily.

"Single-tail?"

His question surprises me, but a glance at his knowing look he's giving me makes me shake my head, laughing.

"No, bullwhip."

"Ah," he wisely surmises, then gets back to working on the scales. I wonder if I should say more, and part of me feels the need to clarify that I'm more comfortable with being the one on the other end of the whip, but then I figure I might as well let him believe that Bella beats me up on a daily basis.

Eventually we're done, too, and I take my time admiring the piece of art now covering my arm. The animal looks ready to jump right off my skin, sinewy and strong, while at the same time he is ready to protect his precious flower. I just love it, and when Bella and Mandy rejoin us, I'm nearly as jumpy as she's been all day to show it to her. So much so that it takes me a full minute to realize that she's a little white in the face herself, but I figure that is most likely from her tatt hurting more now that it's done than it did in the process of creation.

Before we go, Mandy takes a few pictures of our tattoos, then a few more of us both together, from the side with my arm curled around Bella's side so that my dragon ends up right next to her lily - and two more with us kissing that way. She already has Bella's email address and promises to send us the best ones, while two print-outs will join the huge wall of their happy customers at the back of the studio.

Armed with a whole arsenal of cleaning products and instructions we finally take our leave and head back home. Bella is unusually quiet in the passenger seat, but I don't worry too much when I see her lift her right shoulder periodically where it sits very lightly against the backrest of the seat. It costs me a lot not to add a few taunting remarks but I decide to act more mature than my ego wants me to and hold my tongue until we're back home.

I have to admit, it feels like a small weight has been lifted off my chest when we find the living room empty, and a note from Jazz telling us that he's out with a few of his colleagues, trying to round up a few more people for his business - and won't be back for several hours still. To me at least it seems like he's making an effort not to get on our nerves too much, and I appreciate that, even though Bella keeps frowning at the note for nearly a minute.

"Would you really prefer if he'd be so broken that he's all curled up on our couch the whole time?"

She must have been lost in her own thoughts because she jumps at the sound of my voice, then hastily puts the note down and shakes her head.

"No, of course not. I just hope he doesn't take an example from Alice and goes into full-blown avoidance mode now."

Nothing I can add to that, really, so I hug her from behind and pull her against me, relishing the low laugh she rewards me with.

"Stop it, you insatiable beast you!"

"Beast, huh?"

"Yes, a beast," she huffs, then tabs the bandage over my tatt lightly. "That dragon really fits you perfectly. Although I think it still lacks some smoke coming from its nostrils, when it's huffing and puffing indignantly."

I accept her jab with a grunt, then retaliate by letting my arms slip from around her so I can tickle her sides. Now she's squealing, and before I can catch her again Bella dances away from me and towards the bedroom.

"No, you don't!" she complains when I make as if to grab her again, making me raise my eyebrow.

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"I can't help it, you seem awfully cocky tonight. I think something must have gotten to your head. What you really need right now is a good lesson in proper behavior."

Her eyes light up at my 'threat', but then she bites her lip and shakes her head.

"Not tonight. And I really need to use the bathroom now. Gotta see the tatt from up close."

Then she's gone, leaving me with the distinct feeling that my girl just cockblocked me in the most blatant of ways. Following her upstairs, I stay in the bedroom and give her what time she needs in the bathroom, which is an awful lot as I soon realize. I'm even a little concerned by the time she exits it again and pads over to me. When I kiss her I taste a hint of something I didn't really expect.

"Painkillers? That bad?"

She shrugs, avoiding my gaze, but when I catch her hand and draw her down onto the bed next to me, she offers me a small, apologetic smile.

"Not the tattoo."

I mentally go through all the conversations we've had today, wondering if she's mentioned something like the onset of a headache, but come up blank. Then something else occurs to me.

"Just what were you and Mandy up to when she was giving you the tour?"

As far as I remember the studio's not that large."

Bella shrugs again, the gesture obviously too offhand to be real, but when she sees that I don't buy it, she drops the act of innocence. Instead she's back to gnawing on her lip, her standard nervous gesture, but her gaze is laden with something heavier than just chagrin at avoiding me.

"We might have been up to something else, too, yes."

"Something else, huh?"

"Yes," she said, pronouncing the word very precisely, before she crawls backwards off the bed until she's standing right next to me. I follow her movements with my eyes only, and watch in silence as she wrings her hands, then ditches her sweater and halter top she's wearing underneath, leaving her in her pants and the dark blue halter bikini top she's chosen to avoid any bra straps causing her discomfort over her new tattoo.

"You know, this is probably just because I've been watching too much porn."

"There is nothing like too much porn," I reply, grinning up at her. She huffs, then smiles back.

"Okay, scratch that then, maybe I've been watching just enough porn to get curious. Not that I want to attempt a new career as a Suicide Girl, but, you know, I'm a terribly curious person."

"Thankfully."

Another smile, but the way she keeps wringing her hands I wish she's just go on, which she finally does after hooking her thumbs into the waistband of her pants.

"So, well, when I was over at Mandy's last week to see her updated version of the design, we got talking, and one thing led to another, ..." she trails off, then shrugs as she reaches into the cups of her bikini top to get rid of some cotton swaps, in the same motion pulling the top down to pool around her waist. "And then talking led to this."

I let my gaze follow the motions of her fingers as she plucks the fabric from her tits, revealing her nipples hardened in the cool air of the room - and somewhat puffy from the barbells now piercing them. I feel a wry grin come to my face as I look back up to her face.

"Naughty."

She laughs, the sound holding more relief than I think is warranted, but is at the same time so like her.

"Yeah, I'm such a rebel," she offers, then crosses her arms over her stomach in a way that squishes her breasts together enticingly.

"So you like it?"

"A lot." As does my dick.

Bella smiles, her eyes for a moment jumping to my crotch, but then she goes on while she pulls the bikini top off completely.

"Of course that means that my poor, tormented nipples are off limits for you for the next days. No sucking, licking, rubbing, twisting, pretty much no touching because I know how much of a temptation that all must be for you.

And me."

"Don't you trust me to behave myself?"

She considers my question a little too long, but then grins brightly when she sees me frown.

"Of course I trust you. But I also don't want to tease you too much if I can avoid it."

"Really." No question, but a statement.

"I'm not done yet," she offers in turn, then blushes, that in itself as adorable as it is strange. Unless, of course, that talking has lead to more still.

"No?"

"No. You see, when we were done with the tattoo today and Mandy and I were in the back room, getting everything ready for my nipples, I was kind of, ah, afraid. And she kept going on how the pain is not that bad, just like a harder pinch that's over within a few seconds, and, you know me, of course I had to blurt out that I know I can take a lot more than just a few moments of pinching. I think she was still grinning knowingly when she told me to raise my arms so she could place the marks for the needle symmetrically, and I was still rambling when she took it out of the sterile wrapping - and then it was all over, really not more than a pinch, it was nearly disappointing. I mean now it hurts more, but I really thought it would be worse. Mandy was clearly amused by my reaction, and then quite casually told me that it doesn't really get any worse anywhere else if I didn't find the nipples that painful. At least she didn't feel like any of her other 27 piercings were much more painful. And of course I had to ask where else she's pierced, with her tongue, lip, and ears leaving another 13 unaccounted for.

Then one thing led to another, and welll-"

"You're rambling," I interrupt her gently, and Bella actually rolls her eyes at me.

"Yes, I know that I'm rambling! Sheesh! I've worked on that speech the whole way back and now you're interrupting me!"

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, I can see just how sorry! Stop smirking like that, or I'll insist on her fourteen days no sex safety instructions!"

Now that's a threat if I've ever heard one.

"Fourteen days?"

"Well, some people insist on that," she replies haughtily, before her previous grin wins over again. "Anyway, what I was trying to say is that after piercing my nipples was a nearly anti-climactic experience, as far as my worst fears went, I got a little light-headed. And cocky. Impulsive. Like I sometimes do when something I've been dreading turns out to be better than I've hoped for."

Very like her, I agree silently. I've seen it happen time and again, although right now I'm really wishing that she goes on and quits talking.

"Long story short, I finally got my courage back together after Mandy was done taping my nipples up and asked her right away just how much worse the more, ah, fleshier parts of the female anatomy hurt. And she shrugged and said that depends on just how sensitive I am, to which I replied not that much, and -"

"And one thing led to another?" I helpfully supply, causing her to emit a cute growl.

"Yes, it did! So while you were sitting out there, all white in the face and sweating like a pig I ditched the other half of my clothes, jumped up onto Mandy's chair and asked her if my labia were *anatomicallysuited* to be pierced. Happy now?"

"Very," I reply, now smirking at her defiance while my cock is begging me to just shut up as not to incur her wrath. "Outer or inner?"

"Outer," she huffs back, then in an unconscious move she crosses her arms over her chest, which in turn makes her wince when she brushes against her sore nipples. She tries to keep up her stubborn act but I can already see it crumbling, torn apart between her badly contained laughter and more wincing. "And seriously, that bitch must have a hell of a high pain tolerance, because that's so not true with the not much worse!"

"Aw, come 'ere!" I beckon her with my arms open, my belligerence instantly answered by her sticking her tongue out at me. But then she reconsiders her stance and crawls back onto the bed, letting me comfort her with a warm hug.

It has never been so hard to keep my hands mostly to myself, though.

Taking pity in me - or in herself as I am sure that even the soft fabric of her trousers must be irritating her - Bella finally peels the rest of her clothes off.

I grin at the sight of her white cotton panties, that choice telling me that she must have considered needing something less restricting than a thong when she got dressed this morning already, but wisely hold my tongue.

When they finally come off Bella remains lying on her side, her knees still pressed together, but at a gentle nudge from me she lets her thighs fall open so that I can catch a glimpse of the four rings now

adorning her pussy lips, two on each side.

"No touching, tugging, playing around with. Cleaning two times a day, I have to keep them as dry as I can manage. No tight clothing that can cause friction, and when I do have sex again, condoms until the wounds are closed. Healing time between three to six months," she murmurs, sounding very clinical as she does.

"Fourteen days, eh?" I ask again, the implication of that meaning a possible twenty-six days since I let her come the last time if she really sticks to it kind of baffling.

"Well," Bella hedges, "some say two weeks without sex. When she realized that was about the only thing making me hesitate Mandy told me that she didn't last two hours herself when she got hers. But she advised, if possible, only doggie style, and still no touching of the piercings. Anal's okay, though."

That last part makes me chuckle, and Bella lets her thighs fall closed again, but in a way that keeps the pressure off her tormented pussy.

"I know you must find that incredibly funny, but seriously, twelve days is bad. Twice that much and I'll be a tight-wound bundle of insanity."

"Do you really think I would keep you hanging that long?"

"You might," she muses, then grins at my playful frown. "As punishment for not talking with you about getting pierced beforehand maybe?"

"Why the hell should I do that?"

"Just a thought."

While she shrugs that off I feel like she needs a little more reassurance, so I wait until she looks at me again, gnawing on her bottom lip. Again.

"Of course I wouldn't. It's your body, you can do with it whatever you want to. You don't need my permission for that, or anyone else's."

I'm glad she doesn't seem surprised at my words, but definitely relieved.

"Thank you for being so thoughtful."

"Thank *you* for being such a smart-ass," I retort, then kiss her with more heat than before as I let my mind run high with the possibilities her quest for rebellion - or whatever it is, I really don't mind either way - now opens for me. Her answering moan makes me want to just fuck the living shit out of her - which right now I obviously can't.

Fuck.

She looks at me weirdly when I disengage myself from her, chuckling under my breath, but she doesn't

protest when I ditch my own clothes in turn. My arm is burning under the bandage and the urge to rip it off and scratch is at the forefront of my mind even with my cock screaming for attention, and I wonder for a moment just how much worse that all must be for her. That makes me somewhat obliged to help her scratch that one itch I can, at the moment.

"So what do you want to do about that twelve days situation?"

"You're really asking me this?"

Her disbelief causes another chuckle to escape me, this one a lot darker.

"I'm open to suggestions. But if you don't want to offer any, we can just roll over and go to sleep -"

"No, no, suggestions sound good!" Bella muses about that for a few seconds, then frowns. "You know, this new temporary living arrangement is one huge cockblock!"

"Last time I checked it was just the two of us here."

"Yeah, but we can't really do anything downstairs!"

"We still have the bed," I offer. "Most people don't even know you can have sex outside of it."

"Very funny." She considers the soft, dark duvets we're right now lying on, although I wonder if she's not just stealthily eyeing my cock. "Do you just want to fuck, or more?"

"Do you?"

She grins, then shrugs, the motion ending in a slight wince that I presume hails from the sore skin on her shoulder blade.

"I'd love to say I'm in for everything you wanna dish out, but right now I think that would be a moment of massive delusion. And quite frankly, I'm way too horny to just make sweet, sweet love here."

That is quite obvious from the perpetual flush on her cheeks, and when my eyes keep wanting to zoom from her face down to her tits, I get an idea.

The sad fact is, if I fuck her from behind kneeling on the bed, I'm taking half of the fun from myself. But there are ways to avoid that. Taking her hand I draw her off the bed and to her feet, then start walking us towards the bathroom.

"Uh, you heard that part about not spending ages in the shower, right?"

Bella reminds me, earning a stern look from me in turn.

"I'm not stupid. And I don't want to ravage you in the shower, either."

Leaving her standing at the door I hunt down the low plastic stool we keep under the sink so that

Bella can reach the upper part of the towel rack herself and doesn't need me to fetch them all the time.

"Up with you onto the stool, and your other leg goes up onto the countertop," I tell her in a quiet but firm tone, and have to hide a smirk at how she visibly snaps from her tightly wound state into a more relaxed, meeker demeanor.

Having her naked ass right in front of my cock calls for a lesson in restraint from me, but I do my best to try to ignore her juicy bits for the moment. The way she is standing now leaves her not only open and available to me, but at the perfect height so I don't have to slouch, a definite advantage for me - and in the end for her, too. Yet instead of doing what I really want - to grab her hips and fuck her senseless - I reach around her on both sides of her body to switch on the faucet, washing my hands with soap while her eyes never stray from my face.

A light shiver runs through her when she feels my wet fingers on her shoulder, then another when I slowly peel off the bandage over her tattoo and clean it gently with more water, before I do the same with mine. Her skin is slightly red and irritated but less so than mine, and it takes a lot of me not to lean in and ghost my lips over the lily petal blooming across her shoulder blade. I know enough about basic hygiene - and way too much about the serious implications of not keeping it up - to know that my mouth has no place anywhere Mandy's glove covered fingers went today, but it's still hard not to touch Bella wherever I want to. I nevertheless take my time admiring the design in the right light, before I turn my head so I can look at her face in the mirror.

"Beautiful," I murmur, then kiss her shoulder - well away from the irritated skin - before I reach around her for the drawer where we stash the lube. I am aware that she is following every motion of my hands intently, but when I glance up to her face her eyes snap straight ahead again, causing a sly smile to appear on my own.

"I don't mind you watching me. As long as you know your proper place."

"Yes, Master."

"Good girl," I whisper into her hair as I squirt a generous amount of the viscous liquid onto my fingers. Bella tenses a little when I reach down and spread her ass cheeks with one hand unceremoniously, then sighs softly as she feels two of my fingers push into her rectum, her own fingers clenched on the stone of the counter until she's able to relax around the intrusion. I take my time rotating my fingers inside of her to spread the lube everywhere, before I begin fucking her like that for a while. She can't really contribute much friction of her own as she's already on her tiptoes to keep the strain off her raised leg, but from the moans and cut off sighs I can tell how much she enjoys this - while I enjoy the way her swollen nipples bounce along with her breasts with every breath she takes and every thrust she responds to.

Long before I expect her to she starts begging me to let her come, and I slow down a little to drag out her sweet torment. Then again it *has* been twelve days since last I let her come, and it's obvious that the slight pain from the piercings is taking a heavy toll on her stamina. When she realizes that I have no intention of letting her off the hook - yet - Bella looks ready to snarl in my face, earning herself a

hard slap on her ass after I withdraw my fingers.

"I can stop right now, you know," I taunt, snorting when I see the panic in her eyes. Exhaling loudly, I watch her intently as she closes her eyes and tries to regain what little calm she can muster, trying hard to appease me.

"I know, Master."

"Then why are you acting like a petulant child? Maybe you want to be tucked in like a little girl, too? I think it's way past your bedtime anyway."

Heat surges into her cheeks at my condescending tone, this kind of humiliation obviously not her thing.

"I'm sorry, Master. It wasn't my intent to act like that."

I'm mollified by the raspy quality of her voice, speaking plainly of how much she wants to grit her teeth and curse at me but doesn't, and slide my fingers back into her, but even before I feel her relax again something else occurs to me. Grabbing her hair with my free hand I wrench her head back so that I can easily growl into her ear, and the suddenly triumphant look on her face just underlines my suspicion.

"You think you deserve some kind of mercy or leniency from me because you're hurting right now?"

She doesn't reply, just sinks her teeth into her full bottom lip, but that's enough of a response for me.

"You manipulative little piece of shit."

Definitely not the reaction from me she has been hoping for, and I can feel her whole body go rigid with indignation. Even though turning her head must hurt her scalp from the way I'm holding her, she tries to look at me directly, her gaze heavy with need and trepidation alike. We keep up the staring duel for at least ten seconds, then her lids threaten to flutter closed when I resume fucking her with my fingers. I have to admit, the fact that she doesn't just roll over and plays meek is a turn-on for me, but at the same time I'm starting to resent that double-edged game she thinks she can play with me. I know it's a very fine line between playful defiance and ungrateful mutiny, but she can't really learn to hit the right spot without me drawing the lines, right?

"Look at me. I haven't allowed you to close your eyes."

Immediately her lids open again and she glares back at me, but from the way her throat constricts convulsively I know she's trying hard to get a firmer hold on her temper. And as I keep thrusting my fingers into her, her will slowly wins over her temper, her glare soon toning down to a pleading look that is only moderately laced with resentment. Not much of an improvement, but still progress.

Placated yet not satisfied, I finally let go of her completely and take a step back, and notice with new amusement how she rolls her shoulders in discontent at the loss of contact between us. Part of me is tempted to just leave her like that and take care of my hard-on myself - or fuck her throat -

but while I love indulging my cruel streak, I think she has finally started to learn the lesson, and a little bit of positive incentive might help a lot more than pushing her to her breaking point.

I still don't hurry as I put on a condom and slather my cock with lube, stroking my shaft until I'm fully hard. Bella keeps watching me, her brows knitted as if she's afraid I will just keep her like this another day, but when I step back up to her and push the head of my dick into her ass without further ado the frown is quickly replaced by a look of bliss. Picking up a leisurely pace I push into her a little more with each thrust, always withdrawing until I'm on the brink of sliding out of her, ending up with slow, deep thrusts that make her whole body rock. Wound up as she is I feel her bear down on my cock very soon, but I keep up the slow rhythm, one hand around her hip, the other on her raised thigh, as much to steady her as hold her in place.

"Do you think I should let you come today?"

I can feel her clench harder around me as she contemplates the idea, but instead of the onslaught of pleas I've expected, she holds her tongue. I'm about to bark at her for not answering me when she drops her head, the motion bowing her back enough that for a moment it is pressed flush against my chest. I halt, buried balls deep inside of her, when I hear her voice low and husky as she's talking more to herself than to me.

"I really don't want to be so defiant, I don't want to feel like I'm fighting you every step of the way, but I can't help it! I *am* a spoiled little brat, so used to getting what I need in abundance that suddenly deprived of all that I can't not feel partly rejected and treated unfairly."

I wonder for a moment if she wants me to stop entirely, or at least step out of playing as she hasn't used any form of appellation, but when she goes on it's obvious that neither is the case.

"Master, I'm sorry that I can't be your meek little slut. Well, at least not the meek part." She laughs, a breathless, cut-off sound, and finally she raises her head again, pushing it against my shoulder so that her face is next to mine as she catches and holds my gaze over the mirror. "I've tried, so hard, but I just can't! If that's what you want, I'm sorry, but I'm failing by such a long shot, it's ridiculous. So if you'll only let me come if I overcome that will to rebel, you can stop right there because I know I'll never really get there. I can play meek and docile, but I'm not, and I won't lie to you, Master."

By the end of that her voice is low and shaking, and it's obvious that it's costing her a lot to admit defeat. Yet there is no hint of dejection in her tone

- it's not defiance that's making her say this, but honesty. And with honesty I can always deal.

She is surprised when I turn my head and kiss her cheek softly, but she relaxes when she feels my lips skim over her ear.

"I'm not asking you to be all docile and meek if you don't feel comfortable with that," I tell her, letting my nose continue to caress her jaw. "Any form of your submission is a wonderful gift to me." That paints a smile onto her face, a smile that is still on her lips when I reach up and wrench her head back until she gasps. "But if you don't give me what I'm asking from you, I'll just have to take it, right?"

I don't wait for my words to sink in but start fucking her with fast, deep thrusts right away that push her hard against the counter, Bella nearly losing her balance except that she can't slip away with my body pinning her in place. My fingers still twisted in her hair I push her head to the side so that I can scrape my teeth along the side of her neck, then bite into the soft flesh there hard enough for her to cry out - and leave a hint of a mark.

Her whole body is tensed up by the time I look at her face again, but her eyes, half closed now, are dark and full of lust, showing me what I want much more than the act of subservience she has been talking about - her true enjoyment of being *made* to submit to me.

That as much as the wonderful sensation of her clenching so hard around my cock makes me come, and I finish with a few last, rough pumps into her. Her whole body is shaking when I sag down on her, forcing her to take part of my weight as well, adding a different kind of physical strain to the one she's been under for nearly two weeks now. She grunt in turn, the sound turning desperate when she feels my spent cock slip out of her when I pull her raised leg down, and for a minute or so I enjoy watching her war with the knowledge that yes, she will go unsatisfied for yet another day. No longer hiding her struggle I see the emotions run over her face, not for the first time feeling that sense of power that I have over her - and loving every second of it.

She grunts again and tries to turn her head away when I kiss her softly, a silent gesture that so many guys use to apologize to their girlfriends when they, once again, didn't get their needy women off, but she knows that I'm just gloating at her this way, and that doesn't sit well. But I persist, and eventually she turns her head enough so that I can press my lips against hers, and after a little prodding she lets my tongue in.

This way her cry is muffled when she feels three of my fingers push back into her abused ass, but I feel her melt into me a second later. Smirking at her for a moment as I pull my head back I see her smile at me with gratitude, but that is drowned by another yelp when I push her upper body down onto the cold, hard stone of the counter top, forcing her to lose her balance. I hold her securely enough so that it doesn't matter that she can't reach the stool anymore, and after a moment of flailing her legs she goes still, thankfully not kicking my shin or knee.

"You like that, don't you?" I hiss into her ear, then stop with my fingers deep inside of her to let her calm down enough so she can answer.

"Yes, Master!"

I laugh at her, trying to sound derisive but can't quite pull it off, and hear her chuckle between two pants. In retaliation I pull my fingers out of her and spank her hard a few times, hard enough to make my palm burn, but her shrieks are definitely worth it. Then I'm back to making her come on my fingers while I lean over over her, my nose only inches away from her face.

"I want you to hold out as long as you can. We both know that you're so close, and that you can't win this if I forbid you to come. But because you've been such a good little whore these past weeks I won't be that mean this time. Although if I feel like you're not trying hard enough not to come, I won't be so lenient next time."

Unable to really formulate a response she nods her head frantically, and her whole body seizes up when she tries to fight her impending orgasm.

Without a watch it's hard to tell how long it takes her to lose the fight against herself but it's longer than I've expected, making it obvious that I'm still going too soft on her. When she finally comes it's with a loud, drawn-out shout, her whole body bucking underneath me. While impressive in its force, I assume that one climax is not everything I can get out of her, and when I just keep on she reaches a second one a minute later. Only when she sags down in herself completely do I stop, leaving her as a shivering, spent mess, half slid down from the counter.

She's still breathing hard when the sound of a door falling loudly into a lock downstairs startles us both, and the deer caught in the headlights look on her face makes me laugh.

"Fuck! Do you think Jazz, ah, heard any of that?"

I have no doubt that that is the case if he got here minutes ago already and just slammed the door now to let us know, but I don't state the obvious. I don't even mind him hearing us, as it's just a way for me to mark my territory, although I don't think it needs to be marked. My home, my girlfriend I can bang in the bathroom, after all. And because I'm still not quite down from my high I don't even hide that knowledge from Bella.

"Why, want me to ask him right now?"

"Don't be such an ass!" she grunts in return, then tries to shove me off her, but to no avail. I still enjoy letting her struggle for a while before I pull away.

Bella sneers at me before she stalks over to the shower, slamming the door in my face to keep me out. Grinning at her through the hazed over glass I turn around and go back to the sink to clean myself up there instead. Bella is still fussing around in the shower when I'm done treating my tattoo, although from the sound of it she's no longer under the spray but just keeping the water running until I'm done. Not really intent on angering her for real I finally retreat to the bedroom, although I leave the door ajar so that I can watch her strutting around from the bed.

When she finally joins me she seems mollified again, although she still tenses up as if to shove me away when I curl myself around her, spooning her body with my own. In a silent peace offering I kiss her neck where I've bitten her, noting that my teeth have barely left a bruise worth being called a hickey. For a moment I'm tempted to suck on her skin until she has one for real but then refrain from acting that childishly. As much as she seems to appreciate certain souvenirs from our play time, 'normal' marks don't seem to count.

A few minutes into my musing, Bella derails my train of thought when she clears her throat.

"Are you going to punish me for that bit at the end?"

"You calling me an ass?" I ask, already laughing against her shoulder.

She sighs as if my mirth is answer enough, but then nods. "Yes, that."

"Do you think I should?"

The fact that she gives the question some thought makes it easy for me to decide not to go for it, as I feel like we have stopped playing the moment it got apparent that we're not alone anymore, but I like that she doesn't just jump to conclusions.

"Not really. But I won't protest if you think otherwise."

"Good."

"Good?" she hedges, then turns around enough so she can steal a glimpse at my face. "Good as in we're good and you will let the matter slide, or good as in it's good I won't make a fuss if you tan my hide?"

I let a lopsided grin be my answer for a few seconds, but then lean in to kiss her languidly.

"Good as in I'm too tired to do anything now, and tomorrow morning I would probably feel stupid about still insisting on it."

That makes her laugh and snuggle back into my embrace, although she still makes sure that her shoulder blade isn't pressed into my chest.

"Does my little admission mean that you won't go on with pushing my mental boundaries now?"

I shake my head.

"No, unless you want me to?"

"Not particularly, no. But will that still work? I mean, me not being all meek and selfless and all that shit."

As usual, her blunt words amuse me to no end.

"There are so many ways to play this game, I don't think that will be a problem. And I can still keep you hanging dry for weeks at a time whether you grovel for my appreciation or curse me to my face. In face, the latter makes it so much easier for me."

The way she stays pointedly quiet makes it obvious that she's only now realizing just how much she's been playing into my hands with being honest - but when she finally answers with a sigh I know she doesn't necessarily consider that as a bad thing. Neither do I.

"So what, you'll now tease me into losing my calm, then you punish me for being a brat and don't let me come because I haven't been a good girl?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"I can only repeat myself, you're such an ass!"

"I know," I chuckle, then rub my crotch over her ass until she's giggling and I feel my cock start to get hard again.

"There's no real way I can win this, right?"

"There's never a way to win for the sub of the Dom doesn't let her. You know that."

Bella nods, then quiets down in a way that's nearly alarming.

"Something wrong?"

"No, it's just -" she sighs, then shakes her head. "Nothing. I'll just have to wait and see."

"See what?"

"How I can handle disappointing you like that."

My mind grinds to a momentary halt, and it takes me a few seconds to come to the same conclusions as she must have. It *has* been quite a while since I've been on the other side of an arrangement like ours, and I think the fact that things have been going so well between us has let me become complacent about catching any possible pot holes in the road ahead.

Nudging her softly at first, I wait for her to look at me again, and when she doesn't I roll her over so that she's facing me. Her eyes are fixed on my chest rather than my face, and I nudge her chin up gently until she's really looking at me.

"Bella, you're not disappointing me. This game is set up for you to lose, not win, being unable to best me doesn't mean you're disappointing me."

I want to add that as long as she doesn't deliberately fuck up she won't be able to disappoint me ever, but I know that I won't help her by admitting that. I still remember the psychological woes of being an overachieving type of submissive, your own worst enemy.

"But it feels like that, you know? Maybe I've gotten too used to trying to get everything right, but -"

I silence her with another soft kiss, this one lingering as she doesn't seem too intent on continuing to speak. When we finally part she looks a lot less dejected, but doubt is still lurking in her eyes.

"How else should I handle things if not like this?" I try a different approach.

"Either you excel at bowing yourself to my will, you enjoy submitting to me body and mind and find satisfaction in being selfless. Or you don't, you like every step to be a challenge, a battle of wills where eventually I force you to give in and yield. If you know a third way, please tell me, but you giving in grudgingly doesn't leave me with the feeling that you've failed me, but instead that I've pushed you into giving something to me that you don't fling away easily. Just two sides of the same

coin."

Although she obviously agrees with me she still mulls things over until she shakes her head.

"Can't think of any option C here. But I really don't see us playing in that meek and gentle way. I just love you acting like a mean, domineering bastard too much. And you can never go wrong with hair pulling, down holding, rough sex!"

"Yeah, for some reason whenever I do that your protest isn't really all that convincing."

She laughs at my dry remark, her previously glum mood lifted.

"So, how do we handle it if Jazz really heard us?"

"We just ignore it and pretend it didn't happen? I don't really think he'll be gloating at us; at least from the way he's been avoiding us today I'd say he's trying hard not to appear as a nuisance."

"True. Let's just hope that our attempt at don't ask, don't tell works better than it does for the Army. And it's not as if he doesn't know how we sound when we fuck."

That doesn't deserve an answer and I kiss her good-night without commenting on her abashed look, either, before I close my eyes. Not much I could say to that, as quite frankly, yes, he knows.

Chapter 24

As usual, I wake up before Bella. A look at the alarm clock at the nightstand tells me that it's early even for me, only 5:30, but try as I might, I can't go back to sleep. My whole arm itches, and the only thing I can think of that might distract me from that is waking Bella to pick up where we've left off the night before. But I know that she will not really appreciate that - of all the people in the world I have to be madly in love with the worst morning person there is. And as going down on her to pacify her is off limits right now, I decide to let her sleep and jerk off in the bathroom instead.

But of course the tatt is itching just as much when I'm done cleaning my hands and cock afterwards, and slathering the skin with lotion only helps so much. Restless and frustrated I slink back into the bedroom and don my running clothes. It's still dark outside and the heavy November mist is less than inviting, but I have to burn off energy somehow. The sleepy grunt I get in return when I kiss Bella's shoulder underlines the wisdom of my choice.

Until I come face to face with Jazz downstairs I've nearly forgotten about him staying over. Or not quite forgotten, more like having been very successful in ignoring that fact. Before I can stop myself I feel my shoulders tense up in expectation of some jibe or other - while he has probably never said anything to Bella when she stayed over at our house, I've gotten my fair share of snarky remarks from him, and dealt out at least twice as many myself - but he only mumbles a tired "Good morning," around a spoonful of yogurt. At least now the mystery is solved why he hasn't eaten breakfast with us the day before, if his behavior today is any indication.

Returning his greeting in kind I'm about to walk out of the condo when I realize how strange he is acting - actually it's the first time ever that I've seen him eat his preferred main food group straight from the container, and I'm surprised that the mess of cornflakes that he has left on the counter when he poured them into the yogurt doesn't drive him crazy. What I see when I scrutinize him more closely confirms my suspicion - he doesn't look as if he has slept at all last night, and while I might not be the best judge on that topic, he seems worse off this morning than the evening he has shown up on our doorstep.

The nasty, vengeful part of me cackles gleefully at that realization but I force myself not to gloat at his misery - and instead surprise myself with the words my sleep addled brain comes up with.

"I'm going for a run, wanna join me?"

Jazz stops chewing his mouthful of food, his eyes flitting over my face as if he's looking for any kind of malicious intent there. When he finds none he swallows and shrugs.

"Only if you're doing this out of some other motive than having pity with me."

Snorting, I incline my head in a silent 'touché' gesture.

"And there I thought dragging you out into that weather would seem like an attempt to get back at you."

He's silent for a moment, then offers a hint of his usual bright grin.

"True. I'll be back in a sec."

While he ruts through his stuff to find his running shoes I busy myself with checking my phone. Then we take off into the hostilely cold morning together.

For the first mile neither of us speaks, and I feel myself relax a little more with every block we pass. Over the summer I've gotten used to running alone unless Bella insist on joining me, but while I don't mind slowing down for her, when I run, I want to *run*. It's my way of shutting down my mind and letting my body finds its limits - I guess most people use sex for that purpose, but as much as I like to play, I can't ever let my guard down. But I can, and do, when I let houses, streets, trees, rivers zoom past me. Only I don't like to be alone all the time, how much so I only realize now that Jazz is along with me again.

I can tell that he has kept up running in the meantime, maybe even worked out more than before. I've always been the faster one of us, longer legs and more time spent outdoors than in the gym helping, but I don't have to slow down at all for him to stay right on my heels. Probably because Alice would have let him go to the dojo without complaints but griped at him playing *Halo* all night on the xbox, the nasty voice in my head helpfully supplies. And if things were less than stellar between them, he'd probably had to burn off any excess energy through physical exertion, too, as I can't imagine Alice being the kind of woman to put out when she's grumpy. At that I remind myself that Jasper's sex life is in no way of any concern to me, and increase my pace just a little more to shut my brain up from providing any more entertaining notions like that.

There aren't many people up and about yet, and we encounter only a handful of other joggers and dog walkers. Most notable is a pair of women running in the opposite direction - they even stop their animated conversation that doesn't seem to be hampered by their speed to smile and greet us - and I'm surprised that Jazz has barely a look and nod to spare for them. Like the spilled cornflakes incident his complete lack of interest in displaying his usual charm makes me wonder just what is going on in his head. Try as I might I can't stop myself from feeling sympathy for him, and from that moment on the silence between us seems awkward to me. As if I'm deliberately shutting him down out of spite when he probably needs a friend right now like seldom before in his life. Although I'm still honest enough with myself that my motivation behind striking up a conversation is not exactly to let him vent, but for me to stop feeling like an ass.

We have to slow down a little to get out more than a few coherent words, and after several still pressed, single-word answers we finally find a few topics we can discuss - sports, news, video games - and by the time we are back home and spend another few minutes outside stretching talking to him feels nearly natural again. I don't even try to steer the conversation to anything more meaningful or possibly loaded as I guess he will eventually get there if we wants to, but just chatting like that seems to ease some of the strain he is dragging around with him.

Upstairs Bella is awake if looking a little disheveled, her hair still damp from the shower as she fills three mugs of coffee from a freshly brewed pot. I give her a proper good morning kiss before I go shower and dress, hurrying up so that Jazz can hit the shower afterwards before he catches a cold in

his sweaty clothes. Because our apartment isn't intended to house guests we have two bathrooms but only one equipped with a shower - the one adjacent to our bedroom - and for the first time I wonder who plans something that impractical.

Bella is silent through most of our breakfast - without Jazz once again as he is still in the shower - until I nudge her elbow gently to get her attention.

The wide-eyed look she gives me tells me more than words ever could, and I sigh inwardly as I reach for my yet neglected coffee.

"What's wrong?"

For a moment it looks as if she's about to deny that there is something bothering her, but at a brief glare from me she drops the pretense, her eyes flitting towards the stairs.

"Did he say anything?"

"About what?"

"Don't be so dense, you know what I mean!" she hisses, but before I can answer - or laugh at the way her cheeks start to haze over with a hint of a blush - Jazz joins us, and after a moment of hesitation takes his cup of coffee over to the breakfast bar to sit down at the end closer to me. I'm a little surprised that he doesn't take the seat next to Bella, but then I catch the stare she is still directing at him.

While ready to offer help, she hasn't actually been very welcoming towards him - not that I blame her, but it only now occurs to me how that must seem to him. In turn I feel a twinge of guilt at my own behavior - shouldn't I have been the one acting the most hostile? - but then I quell the thought before it can start bothering me. I know Bella has had ample opportunity to express any misgivings about my behavior, and I have to admit, she only seems to want to stay distant from Jazz herself, while my attempts not to act up have only gotten me grateful smiles from her. As if she's happy that one of us can at least act civil.

Way before I want to I have to leave for the hospital, Bella on my heels although I know that she rarely starts working before nine in the morning, and for the next four days I have more important things to worry about than whether Bella will kick Jazz's head in sooner or later or not at all. The cold weather and pre-Thanksgiving madness bring hordes of people into the ER, and I can rarely catch enough time to properly eat before the next full free day. Which gets shoved back another three agonizing long shifts when Amanda tells me that she just can't let me go home with patients standing in line in front of the OR.

When I finally come home I'm so tired I nearly fall asleep in the elevator.

Two failed attempts to get the door unlocked finally get Bella to open it from the inside, and she greets me with a warm embrace, a passionate kiss, and a much appreciated, "Gee, you look like shit!"

That's my girl, always has the right words ready.

A strong cup of coffee and some real food later I drag my sorry carcass upstairs into the bed, not surprised that Bella stays up. Only the next morning I realize that things between her and Jazz have shifted a little, at least judging from the way they joke their way through breakfast. It's a relief to see her more at ease around him again, although I feel a little jealous of the time he gets to spend with her while I'm not around, which in turn makes me feel stupid. I still drag her back into bed when she follows me upstairs to brush her teeth, but I haven't even successfully gotten my hand into her pants when she stops me cold by pushing away from me.

"Edward, stop."

Confused, I look at the clock first, but it's still early enough that she won't be late for work, and I don't remember her saying anything about having an important meeting today. She's also still in her sweat pants, not dressed for work and without make-up applied, so it really can't be that. My eyes find hers and I raise one brow, hoping she will explain, which she does with a sigh - and a quick gaze towards the closed bedroom door.

"I'm really not comfortable with having sex right now."

"Why not?"

She looks at me for a long moment as if that should have been obvious, then catches her lower lip between her teeth.

"Because I'm not comfortable with having sex right now."

"Your period?" I venture a guess, although I know the answer already.

"No. And you know that has very seldom stopped you. Or me, for that matter."

I'm tempted to play this game until she spills the beans, but I'm tired of it already.

"So you don't want to have sex with me because Jazz is here now."

She nods, obviously waiting for me to throw a fit or something, but when I don't react at all, she sighs.

"I'm just not comfortable with it."

"You keep repeating that. And just for the record, three times is not the charm here."

She snorts but offers me an apologetic smile at the same time.

"I know. But I can't really explain it in different words."

"You are aware that he won't expect us to be celibate just because he's hogging our couch, right?"

"This is not about him hearing us!" she huffs, then gets up from the bed to start pacing. "This is about

me not wanting to give him anything to hear!"

"Okay," I offer in reply, more to the way she throws her hands up in their air than her actual 'argumentation' - while both my mind and cock feel like throwing a fit on their own now.

"Really?"

Her surprise makes me second-guess if I should have fought a little harder for getting some, but the last thing I want is for her to be upset. And I can't shake off the feeling that there is more to this than her just being squeamish.

"Don't get me wrong, the fact that I'm the only one who in one way or another doesn't get to influence when who is going to fuck in this house doesn't escape me, but if you don't want to have sex, then we won't. It's that easy, and you know that."

Bella nods but still looks chagrin enough that I wonder if she secretly wants me to ignore her, but if that's the case, she has to tell me so, one way or another. And while I respect her wish, I don't hide that I'm not very happy about it - particularly with work taking so much of our time together away from me already.

I stay in bed until Bella has left for work, before I get dressed and head out myself. Not many people around that I can visit during the week at this hour of the day, so it's no surprise that I turn up at Rose and Emmett's. I've called her before I've left home but Rose still greets me with a joyful "Oh look who's here!" before she hugs me, not in the least bit hindered by the infant in her arms, and draws me inside.

She looks tired and worn out - and the fact that it must have been weeks since she last slept for more than three consecutive hours doesn't help her generally rumpled appearance. I've seen her without make-up before but never wearing sweat pants and a washed-out t-shirt to go with it, and it's obvious that she hasn't hit the shower today. Yet before I can let out a remark about her appearance or comment on why she has to emphasize my arrival like that when Mona won't care one way or another, I realize that Rose already has a visitor.

Next to Rose Alice looks even more perfectly put together than she usually does, and her lacquered nails and designer clothes are out of place between the baby stuff strewn across the living room. As usual when I meet her my first reaction is to smile, but she doesn't reciprocate; in fact I haven't even gotten my shoes off yet when she surges to her feet, and in a bustle of activity and air kisses leaves. Or rather flees.

Rose and I share a long look until she shrugs and closes the door behind Alice, the frown on her face gone by the time she turns back to me again.

"Wow, that was fast. I thought she'd stay at least long enough to give you her practiced 'why, of course everything is okay!' speech."

Trust it to Rose not to give a crap about sweet-talking things.

"So you got that one, too?"

"Nope, it's all for your benefit only," she teases, then walks over to the fridge. "Can I get you anything to drink? I think we only have diet coke or water, but it's some kind of choice, right?"

After accepting a can of coke I follow her into the living room, then spend the next few minutes making funny faces at Mona - who requites my efforts by starting to cry, although Rose assures me that it's not my fault. I cannot quench the feeling of rejection welling up in me - first Bella, then Alice, and now even the baby - today doesn't seem to be my day. But contrary to the other two Mona's just tired, and after she is safely tugged in Rose returns to me, looking even more strung out.

"Shit, I tell you, this little bundle of happiness is sucking the very life out of me!"

Despite of her words she's grinning as she flops down onto the couch, and her smile is easily infectious.

"Wait until she's old enough so that you have to watch your language. I bet that's going to be much worse for you."

"Asshole," she gripes back, then shrugs. "Em's mother is already hounding me that I cannot use such, how does she put it? Ah, right, 'filthy terms'

around her granddaughter because that will just turn her into a dirty whore like her mother."

I have to fight hard not to snort my mouthful of coke right back out through my nose.

"So things between you and her haven't improved since you had Mona?"

"No, me legally stealing her cuddly little boy and bearing his little demon spawn all within just a few months haven't exactly made me her favorite person yet."

I nod - not much I can say to that. I'm glad that my mother in particular loves Bella, and while Charlie is still acting reserved and awkward around me, I've never gotten the impression that it's me personally he doesn't want in Bella's life. I've only met Emmett's parents twice, and both occasions have left me wondering how Em has had a chance to grow into the man he is, although I keep suspecting that Rose had an integral part in emancipating him from the prude, conservative life his parents clearly intended for him.

"Speaking of favorite persons, how's Jazz?"

Rose's toothy grin deserves no acknowledgement, and I don't really get the impression she's particularly interested in his well-being.

"I take it you know that he's crashing on our couch."

"Everyone knows, Edward. Which you would know if you were checking facebook like every sane person in the universe."

Now that's definitely news to me, but not really surprising. And I can't even think of the last time I've looked at anything other than my missed calls and emails.

"Then you will probably know more about his current state of health or sanity than me, as you probably read his and Bella's posts every day."

"Neither of them said anything about it. It was actually Jessica Stanley who posted it a few days ago. Clogged up my *Farmville* notifications for half a day. That skank."

The fact that she actually sounds offended for real makes me crack up anew, but then I catch her inquisitive gaze, which shuts me up quickly again.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just wondering how you're doing with him hanging around."

"He's really not that much of a hassle. And when I spend the next weekend working my ass off at the hospital again Bella at least has someone to keep her company."

"Like a dog, eh?"

I don't comment on that as she clearly doesn't expect me to, but before Rose can go on teasing me I steer the conversation back to the topic that's concerning me a lot more.

"What did you mean about Alice and her practiced speech?"

"She was here already when you called, and of course she needed to know who it was I kept flirting with on the phone, so I told her that you were coming over. I still can't decide if it was funny or just disconcerting how she blanched at hearing that."

Something deep in my gut clenches at her words, Rose's playful tone aside, and I can see from the way she keeps looking at me that she knows how much Alice's behavior concerns me. The fact that she sounds more serious when she goes on just underlines that.

"Just give her a little time, she'll fall back into her usual chipper self soon enough. It seems like only a month ago that you complained that she keeps calling you to tell you stuff that doesn't interest you at the worst of times."

"That's because we actually had that conversation a month ago."

"Ah, how time creeps along when you never get any sleep anymore!" she retorts, then sighs. "But as weird as Alice's way of dealing with things uncomfortable is, I can understand her this time."

"You can? That makes one of us."

"Seriously, would you want to talk with the guy who's most likely to whack you over the head with the same ol' 'I told you so!' when you already know that he's right?"

Her words make me blink in irritation.

"I'd never say that to her."

"Not? You'd be right, too."

Her words make me halt, but while seemingly hungering for gossip, there is no guile to Rose's interest.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but as far as I know neither of them did anything to warrant me saying that. Of course it's entirely possible that I'm missing something here as I barely know anything about what really happened between them. Nor do I particularly care."

"You don't?"

Rose's doubt sounds genuine.

"No, I don't," I emphasize, and when she keeps scrutinizing me, I'm surprised that I even believe what I'm saying. "They are both my friends. Of course I'd rather see them happy, but some people are not meant to be together. Tough luck, but seriously, I don't think it's that much of a surprise that they didn't stick together that long after trying twice before and not even making it over the weekend. Things might have been sketchy between us over the last months, sure, but I don't think it's my place to lay blame with either of them. And even if it was true, I'd never gloat into Alice's face. You should know me better than that. And so should she."

The last part must have come out more dejected sounding than I want to as Rose reaches over and squeezes my shoulder, offering a warm if sad smile.

"She probably knows. Maybe it's just too painful still? Maybe she just doesn't know how to deal with rejection?"

"Rejection? She broke up with him."

For a moment doubt is adding to the queasy feeling in my stomach - what if everything Jazz has told us is really a lie? But then Rose smacks her lips and makes an offhand gesture.

"Any breakup is always full of rejection for both parties. I mean, we obviously all expected Jazz to fail to keep up anything more long-term than a few weeks - but can you remember Alice ever staying together with anyone for longer than that? I don't. And her breaking them up just means she has to deal with the pain of it all with the certainty on top of it that it was she who hurt herself this much."

I want to protest, but try as I might, no words come to my mind. Of course Rose is right - Alice has been about as much into commitments as Jazz, and it's entirely possible that until recently, no one really got under her skin like that. She hasn't spent years pining after someone she's considered out of her reach, nor has she ever had to deal with the person she wants most running off with someone else. Because the only time she ever got close to anything like that was when Jazz chose her in pretty much the most extreme way I can think of - and for the first time ever I feel like anything that has happened

on that cursed Friday makes sense.

"It wasn't about us - it was all about her."

Rose lifts one eyebrow at my words but I'm too caught up in my train of thoughts to explain, my mind racing the figurative mile a minute. Part of me wants to cling to what I have believed to be the one possible explanation for so long, but the more I mull things over, the harder it gets to deny that maybe, just maybe there is another option. As rash as Rose can be sometimes, she remains calm and just looks at me, a silent offer to be my sounding board if needed. And like so many times before I finally take her up on it. For whatever reason, it's always been easy for me to voice my thoughts around her - maybe because her rash and no nonsense way conveys the kind of brutal honesty so few people know how to handle well.

"I was just thinking, the whole mess back in early summer - I think Jazz did that entirely for Alice."

The look she deals me could have withered a mountain, but when she sees that I'm serious, Rose clears her throat.

"Isn't that what he has said himself before? To Bella at least?"

Momentarily I'm pissed off that she doesn't share my enthusiasm about this new revelation, but then I get where I've lost her.

"He said so much crap to so many people about that day, I'm not sure he himself can still keep his stories straight. But that's not entirely what I meant."

"Which is?"

I test the words in my head first, feeling my pulse pick up with the kind of elation only kids feel when they realize that they haven't been caught with the hand in the cookie jar after all.

"It really wasn't about us. Not about me. We were collateral damage, his tools in his stupid ploy to, I don't know, show her his devotion or something."

"You pretty much said the exact same thing before, repeating that won't really make me see it any better, you know?" she retorts, then when she sees me frown, Rose sighs. "E, just spell it out. We haven't really talked that much about your mess-up beyond how you were dealing with Bella regaining her trust in you. Maybe I just know too little about the whole picture."

As usual I feel the wave of desolation and self-loathing surge up inside of me, but it has seldom been so easy to battle it down.

"I guess."

It's still hard to give voice to these thoughts that have been rattling inside my head for so long.

"It's mainly that since that afternoon I've been raking my brain to come up for the reason why he hates

me so much."

Even now acknowledging the sheer fact of that kind of rejection and betrayal is hard, but I force myself to keep eye contact with Rose, using the utter lack of judgement on her face to make myself go on.

"I mean, I can sometimes understand why he might have figured he was protecting her when he tried to force me to fess up about some of the things I had done that I hadn't told her back then. I should probably have told her about Chelsea before, but really, it was hard enough to rout out Bella's own insecurities that already existed without adding a whole new slew of them myself. But he knew how much she enjoyed herself, how well we worked together, I just couldn't understand how he could jump to the conclusions that I would ever pressure her into anything she didn't want to do herself."

"You mean, how could he fuck you both if he was so convinced that you're such a monster."

My brief bark of laughter is answer enough for her, but I do her the courtesy of adding a nod.

"Yes. And let me fuck him, too. But that's beside the point. I really spent all that time beating myself up how the guy who I've thought of as my best friend could think all that of me. Who knew me better than I know myself sometimes. It was so fucking easy to believe that although what he said was bullshit, it was so easy for Bella to believe, even for a few hours, because there was more than just a grain of truth to it all."

The sadness in her eyes reflects what I feel inside, but unlike Bella she doesn't feel the need to comfort me.

"He made you doubt yourself, made you hate yourself, and that's why it took you so damn long to get your head out of your ass again."

"Yup."

Rose mulls that over for a moment, then shrugs.

"The fact that he used his two best friends and disregarded any emotional fallout that might come from that just to land with a girl doesn't exactly paint him in a better light than trying to protect Bella by proving to her what a bad egg you are."

"But it's so typically Jazz that I can't really stay mad at him for the rest of my life."

Her snort is loud enough to double as a scoff.

"And that's something I'd expect Bella to say, not you. You don't give anyone free hall passes like that."

"It's not like this makes anything that has happened better. But it makes *me* feel better, simply because I can justify wanting to stop jumping at my own shadow whenever he's around just because I expect him to drag the next blood-thirsty killer rabbit that's out to get me out of his imaginary hat."

Viewing things under this light also explains why he hasn't done anything to backstab me over the summer. Why he hasn't sicced Charlie at me at Bella's birthday party, why he has tried several times to strike up a light, meaningless conversation without trying to make me look like an ass - and also why he has never defended himself when I've gotten into his face like the defensive little fucker I've been acting like. All that doesn't make up for the damage he has caused - but at the same time I'm finally able to accept a fact that has been weighing me down for a while now - as much as I want to punch him in the face for how he has made me feel, I just don't have it in me anymore to hate him. He might be a manipulative asshole, but he has also been my best friend since college, and while I'll never be able to forget what he has done, I can maybe start to forgive him.

"I take it that's a good thing as you're not living inside a Monty Python's movie?"

"I'd say yes," I retort. Rose rewards me with a wise nod.

"Too bad, really, I was so hoping for a spectacular fight between you and him at some Christmas party or other. I know, wishful thinking, but a girl can dream."

"You're watching too much second-rate TV shows if you actually expect something like that to happen."

"Oh, the showdown between Bella and Alice in the bathroom in spring would have made screen writers weep!"

"But you will agree that it would only have been half as much fun without your revelation about your own devious sex life."

"So true," she laughs, then smiles over her shoulder in the direction of the nursery. "Nothing beats real scandal!"

"By then Alice and Jazz will have moved on anyway."

"Of course they will. Probably sooner than we expect, I don't really think either of them is the type to wallow in silence for months. Oh, wait, actually no one I know except you would ever do that!"

"So nice of you to bask in my past misery once again."

"Ah, Eddie, come on, you're about the only one in our nice circle of friends who gets laid right now, you can take a little scorn from me!"

"Actually that's not necessarily the truth," I retort, earning an eye roll from her.

"Why, does the mean hospital keep you away from your sweet Bella? Or is it the bogeyman on your couch that's got your panties all in a twist?"

"Neither, actually. The missus just doesn't feel comfortable with her BFF possibly listening in on us getting it on."

Rose's laugh is loud enough to make her clap her hand over her mouth in fear that she has woken up the baby, but when we don't hear her crying, she sighs, then shakes her head.

"You don't really believe that that would stop her?"

"It's what she's told me, at least. And why should she lie to me?"

"Maybe it's simply not the whole truth?" she offers, and I can't shake off the feeling that Rose knows more than she seems to want to tell me.

Interesting, and somewhat disconcerting. Just when I want to ask her about it, her phone rings, which in turn does wake up Mona, and the following fifteen minutes of us trying to coerce her back into sleep about conclude that conversation. I still stay over midday and get some take-out for both of us, but our banter never quite gets back to the topic of what might or might not be going on with Bella.

When I finally leave her to nursing her baby with the promise to drop by soon again my mind returns to pondering that question again. I don't really know how to react, partly because I'm not sure if there's really anything going on. I don't even want to suspect that she's lying - also not by omission - but I can't shut off the concerned boyfriend part of me. Then again I can't rule out that I'm simply overthinking things, and she's just too tired and stressed with work, Jazz staying over, and me adding our own special kind of pressure to her life. In the end I decide to just trust that she will come to me with whatever is troubling her, if it's something I can help her with. It's her life, and I don't have to be part of everything in it.

I'm only moderately surprised to find Jazz working on his laptop when I get home - against all odds his new business venture seems to be bringing in some contracts already. He absentmindedly returns my greeting, then keeps typing when I don't say anything else. I'm so used to either being alone or with Bella that sitting in the same room with him weirds me out after a while, and because the weather isn't too bad I decide to go for a run.

Yet before I can get off the couch I hear Jazz's chair scrape back.

"Hey, wanna go shoot some hoops? At least there's a basketball court down at the park around the corner, and I've never seen anyone play during the day there."

I'm a little surprised by his offer, but after a moment of hesitation nod.

"Sure, I think we've still got the ball stored somewhere here."

Back when we've been living at the house together we used to play a lot -

or sometimes just shoot hoops while talking, or getting drunk - and like with so many things of late it takes me actually hunting down the ball to realize how much I've missed those old habits. Ten minutes later we're at the court and find it deserted as expected. It's cold enough outside that we actually run, dribble and jump for real to keep warm, but that doesn't hamper our easy conversation.

After recounting pretty much every general sports event that I've missed during the last week for me

Jazz seems to run out of topics, and when he scores five 3-pointers in a row I feel a little vindictive.

"I've run into Alice today."

He doesn't even glance my way but his next shot barely even hits the hoop before it bounces back, and I catch him roll his shoulders in what I know is a defensive gesture for him from the corner of my eye.

"I hope she's doing okay?"

He even sounds sincere, which makes me feel a little guilty for bringing up the topic, but when my next throw evens out the score I decide that it was worth it. And some time he'll actually have to face that she's still around.

"She seemed fine, if a little stressed. But I couldn't really tell because she ran off within the minute I showed up at Rose's."

"Always the little busy bee," he snorts, then does a slam-dunk by the book.

When he passes the ball back to me it hits my chest a little harder than necessary, but I ignore the silent challenge.

"Yeah, seems like she's too busy to talk to me at all, compared to half the city, including Jessica Stanley."

"So you finally checked your facebook?"

"Don't need to with people like Rose and you who can tell me any day what others post."

Jazz snorts, and accepts the ball back from me in momentary silence. I'm about to think he's going to change the topic when he starts idly bouncing the ball without moving, but after a few seconds he turns back to me, the ball all but forgotten.

"I've tried calling her, four times, but she doesn't pick up. Not that I'm surprised about that, but it's still-", he trails off there, then throws the ball, not even checking if he scores or not. The pain so plain on his face makes my stomach clench in sympathy, and I feel like an ass for even having brought up the subject. Then the moment passes, and he visibly shakes himself as if the motion can clear his head of whatever is lodged there.

When he goes on his voice is flat, deliberately void of emotion. "You know her - she'll move on, get over it, and in a few months from now it will be as if nothing ever happened. That's Alice in a nutshell."

I want to protest, defend her, call him a liar - but the sad truth is, he's right.

Jazz accepts my silent acknowledgement for what it is, then sighs.

"Maybe that's exactly what I should be doing, too. Move on, I mean. But I still love her, and although I

know that what we had is over, I don't want to let go. And I have definitely seen too many chick flicks as my brain is able to spew out crap like that!"

Chuckling under my breath I accept the ball back from him.

"Obviously."

We both score a few points before Jazz speaks up again.

"Things seem to be pretty harmonic between you and Bells."

"As much as can be expected, yeah," I reply, then pointedly ignore the look he's shooting me.

"And there I always thought the 'as can be expected' is people's way of saying 'like fucking crap, really'."

His remark makes me snort, and he shrugs when he sees me glance at him.

"Well, considering you've been staying over for what, nearly two weeks?

And we've only had sex once in the time because of my insane work schedule and Bella being all creeped out by you hanging out on our couch, I feel like saying 'fucking crap' anyway."

"Seriously?"

The open surprise on his face makes me crack up.

"Trust me, that's one thing I wouldn't lie about."

"Yeah, like you're that great of a liar in the first place."

I don't even pretend that I haven't aimed the basketball to nearly hit his head for that, but Jazz takes it in stride with a grin. We keep up the light banter for a little while longer, before Jazz picks up the ball and turns to me.

"How about we hit one of the pubs around here? There must be a better place than freezing our balls off here in the cold."

"Sure, because a cold beer is the ideal thing to warm up with."

Ignoring my jibe, he throws the ball at me.

"You can drink it piss warm, too, if you want to."

"Like hell."

Ten minutes later we've found a bar that's open and not crammed with after work business people, and we settle down. After emptying half of my bottle in one go I get out my phone and write Bella a

short text where we are if she wants to join us once she gets home from work. When I put the phone away I see Jazz follow the motion with his eyes, and at my questioning look he shrugs.

"I was just wondering if she'll show up or prefer to stay home, relishing not having me around."

"You're not that much of a nuisance."

His snort is short of derisive, but when I don't react he leans a little closer.

"Seriously, if my girl would cockblock me because of the guy crashing on the couch I would call him a lot more than that."

"Yeah, maybe I'm just gracious because I know that by the time you find your own place she's going to be so frustrated that I wouldn't be able to fend her off if I wanted to. Not that that's ever gonna happen."

He shakes his head laughing before he takes another sip.

"If you need me to be gone for a certain time on a certain day, just say so, Bella is cranky enough as it is, can't really justify being a real reason for that, too."

"Cranky?" I know that she's still somewhat reserved towards him, but I wouldn't have described her behavior like that.

"You know, terse, cool, takes most of what I say way too literal, stuff like that. Her way of expressing disapproval without even glaring for a second.

Although, come to think of it she does her share of glaring at me, too. But not the whole time, it comes and goes with her moods, and I have no idea what causes it."

At first I think he's joking, but Jazz remains completely serious. Not being around much of late cuts back on my chance to observe any of that myself, but it sounds about right from what I should have expected.

"Be glad Alice didn't break up with you a month ago, Bella wouldn't have let you stay over for more than a day back then."

He doesn't even look particularly baffled.

"I know, she's been acting like that ever since Rose had the baby. But shit, I really have no clue what I've done to incur her wrath like that."

Despite the seriousness of the topic his words paint a grin onto my face, but my mirth is mostly superficial, and heavy on the scorn side. Of course he picks up on that but takes it in silence, and after a few moments I clear my throat.

"Do you really wanna know?"

He nods, appropriately wary.

"If you know what's up, sure."

"Of course I know what's up with her." I don't even try to hide the scorn in my voice at the implication that I have no idea why my girlfriend is acting weird. Then again I'm not about to tell him just for the sake of gloating, not to make it easier for him to deal with her, but out of a certain amount of vindictive glee. If my revelation today with Rose has been right, I have every reason to rub his face in the fallout of the shit he has caused - and has probably not even realized exists.

Rolling my empty bottle between my palms, I stare at the green glass for a moment before I catch his gaze, steeling myself against trudging into a topic I haven't expected to be discussing with him ever.

"Remember your little prep talk that you gave her the week after our colossal fuck-up?" I can be fair, he's not the only one to blame for it all.

Jazz nods, and I have to hold back a chuckle at the way he's suddenly all tensed up himself. "Obviously I don't know what exactly you told her because she doesn't like talking about it, but I know you were mostly trying to make her see that I'm a despicable asshole because of the things I've done; the things I like to do. I think the reason why she pretty much shrugged it off back then was because she knew you were just spewing bullshit, and it wasn't like any of that really concerned her. But guess how remembering all that makes her feel now, half a year later when a pair of plush covered handcuffs makes her laugh rather than blush."

At first it's genuine confusion on his face, but then the meaning of my words sinks in.

"She can't really think that I meant *her* with all that? Bella knows me better than that!"

"Does she?"

"Of course she does!" he huffs, but I can see from his frown that he's starting to doubt his own words. There's a lot I could add - but I keep my tongue and instead get up to flag down the bartender. Armed with two fresh bottles of beer and a couple of darts I stop next to Jazz, then nod towards the darts board.

"Wanna play?"

He's downright grateful that I don't pick up the previous topic again. It's been a while since I've played but at least neither of us is too drunk yet to miss the board, although we're not shy to insult each other.

"So what else besides you quitting your job did I miss?" I finally steer the conversation to something else than my inability to hit the same fields consistently.

"Well, not much," he grunts, then squints at his own less than stellar result on the score board. "Much work, not much time for anything else with Alice flitting across the globe with her fashion shows. Guess the most noteworthy was that I met Jack Sullivan from college. Remember the guy who nearly

blew up the dorm with his makeshift moonshine distillery?"

"A great moment for us all, and definitely unforgettable," I muse, lost in the memory for a moment.

"You at least didn't get busted for smoking pot! I still can't believe they just let you walk away like that when you'd so obviously had more than just a contact high!"

"Yeah, that was pretty funny. I think I laughed my ass off for hours."

Jazz scowls at my grin for a moment, then cracks up himself.

"It was! Ah, good times."

We finish the next round in amicable silence, then get another round of beers.

"Anything new on your side, except for you calling off the wedding?"

I shrug.

"Not really. And I can't say I resent my life being kinda boring."

"No one ever really does," he grunts, then throws a couple more darts that barely hit the board. "I've really missed this, you know? Us just hanging out, getting a couple of beers, stuff like that."

"Me too," I admit, a little surprised just how much that's the truth. Jazz seems to have expected a different answer, or at least a scathing remark from me, but when neither comes he relaxes visibly as he empties his bottle.

"How about we switch to something stronger?"

"Tequila?"

"Always."

We abandon the dart board for the bar, and a few shots later the somewhat stop and go of our conversation soon runs into a continuous if not quite coherent string of anecdotes and wise-cracks. By the time we finally go home we're both no longer steady on our feet, and Bella greets us with a frown and a laugh.

"Drunk and sweaty, do you even need to ask why I didn't drop in when I got your text?"

I find her snide remark as funny as it gets, which makes it obvious just how drunk I really am, but don't protest when she herds me off into the bathroom upstairs after wishing Jazz a good night. I'm not surprised but still grumpy that she doesn't respond favorably to my less than subtle attempt to seduce her, but like before I accept that she doesn't want to have sex -

for now.

The next morning going to work is hellll- the combination of sexual frustration, a light hangover and some residual soreness in my muscles makes me less than happy to leave the bed, and the following killer shifts at the hospital don't help to improve my mood. The only thing that keeps me going is the promise that between the day before Thanksgiving until Black Friday afternoon I'm going to be off rotation so that I can at least see my family again. And maybe guilt-trip Bella into a booty call or two if we haven't gotten rid of Jasper until then.

The few days until then all blur together, and when I finally make it home for my fifty hours of freedom it's already late afternoon. Neither Bella nor Jazz are in so I go straight to bed, and it feels like only seconds later when the loud bang of the door downstairs falling into the lock startles me awake again. I'm about to roll over and pretend I'm not awake when I hear someone running up the stairs. A moment later the door bursts open and Bella comes charging in, grumbling under her breath. She sees me blink at her groggily, and the next thing I know she's on me, her lips pressed hard enough against mine to bruise.

My mind hasn't caught up yet when she's already done yanking off my t-shirt somehow, then her hands are inside my boxer briefs, and what minimal thought capacity I've had flees when her hot, wet mouth slides down on my cock. I moan as my eyes close again on their own account, convinced that this must be a dream my frustrated mind has come up with out of sheer frustration.

Then her mouth is gone, leaving me grumpy for a moment as that just underscores my dream theory, but when I open my eyes again Bella is still there, only now busy literally tearing her clothes off. I'm still amazed how fast she can get out of her jeans when she's crawling upwards and over me, the heat of her body enticingly close. A critical look down and she wraps her hand around my cock, stroking me fast and determined while her eyes are fixed on mine. I can't read the look on her face, partly because all the remaining blood in my head is rushing south very fast, and I abandon the seemingly inconsequential attempt when she lets go of my dick with a grunted, "Should be sufficient."

My hands find her hips just as she leans towards me, her mouth hungry against mine. She doesn't protest when I pull her close, in fact she rolls her hips against mine so that my now hard cock slides along her pussy lips. But then she stops, one hand pressed against my chest as she props herself up there, her eyes again intent on my face.

"No games. No begging, teasing, whatever, I just need you, and I need you now, I can't -"

A small voice in the back of my head tells me to let her go on but my mind isn't the part of me that's in control now, and instead of heeding that advice I pull her head down to devour her mouth, then flip us over so that I'm crouching over her. She lets out a throaty chuckle when I grip her hips to hold her down for a moment, then thrust into her, relishing how her body yields to mine.

More groping and sloppy kissing ensues, but before long she pushes against my shoulders until I let her roll us over again so she's perching on top of me, her hips grinding against mine while her pussy grips my cock hard.

"If you don't mind, I'm gonna be on top. As much as I love you fucking the living shit out of me, right now you're just not doing a good enough job of that."

Her words, together with the raising of one brow, make me crack up, but I don't protest when she starts bouncing up and down on me.

"Excuse me if I'm not living up to your high standards, but I don't remember the last two consecutive hours I've slept through."

"Yeah, that's why all you need to do is lie back and let me do the work," she laughs, then grabs my hands and brings them to her tits, squeezing them until I get the hint.

"If this is what happens when you don't get to fuck for weeks, I should take advantage of that more often."

Bella makes a face at my words, but the frown leaves her features when I stoke her nipples with my thumbs, making her moan. The piercing are healing well and I can tell that she's still very sensitive, not exactly a bad thing as I see it. She increases her pace, then shifts so that her torso is slightly reclined, her fingers digging into my thighs behind her body. I let go of her right tit to reach down and start rubbing her clit instead, drawing a most satisfying "Fuck!" from her.

She's close to coming, and so am I, and I love getting lost in the moment of crazed need and lust - when suddenly the bedroom door swings open, admitting a somewhat distraught looking Jazz. My brain stutters to a halt and time seems to slow down in that comic way it always does in the movies, but somehow I can still see what is going on with clarity.

"Bella? I know you don't wanna talk to me right now, but, look, I know I've been acting like a complete asshole. And if you want to punch me again, go ahead, I know I deserve it for being such a delusional fool, but you can't just ignore what I've said -"

That's when he finally looks up, and taking us in as we are, stops short.

Panic races through me but it's as if my brain is still disconnected from my body as I can't move, which is probably a good thing right now. I still tense up, waiting for Bella to do something instead - scream, shout, throw something at him, hide under the bed - but when I can finally drag my eyes from Jazz gawking at us to her, my level of confusion only rises. She is completely calm with her eyes fixed on Jasper- except for her heavy breathing from exertion, her whole body shaking slightly with every deep breath she takes - but it's the look in her eyes that twists something in my guts.

There is no confusion there, nor reproach, only a hint of simmering anger -

but as I keep watching it slowly leaks from her, gets swallowed by the predominant emotion present - lust. And that's when I realize that she's not horrified at all that he has barged in on us. Neither am I, I have to admit, and the reason I can tell so easily what's going on inside of her is because the look on her face resonates with something deep inside of me that I've tried so hard to keep locked up and buried.

Jasper clearing his throat finally shakes me out of my brain freeze.

"I ... I'm sorry, I didn't know you were ... ah -"

"Get the fuck out of here!"

My words come out flat and hollow, and after another stutter of something unintelligible Jazz finally gets the hint and walks out backwards, the sound of the door closing behind him echoing through the room with a final quality to it. My head snaps around back to Bella, and her gaze is defiant when I catch it.

"I think it's obvious that we really have to talk," is what she finally says, frustration heavy in her voice. And fuck, I'm really starting to hate these words.

Chapter 25

" *I think it's obvious that we really have to talk.* "

I hate those words, but I know that they are true. We have to talk. We have to, but I don't want to. That's the only thing that my racing mind seems to agree on. Silence stretches between us, until Bella finally extricates herself from my lush grip. She ends up lying next to me on her back, and I can feel her gaze heavy on me, but I just keep on staring at the ceiling.

"Edward?"

Her voice is raspy with emotion, but something in me immediately snags on the note of frustration in her tone, and in response anger rears its ugly head inside of me. I try to fight it, but then I feel her fingers softly caress my arm

– or the spine of the dragon there, as she does a lot of late – and something snaps inside of me. I turn my head and glare at her.

"What?"

She shies away for a moment, clearly taken aback by my bitten off retort, but before I can wonder how much damage my impulsiveness has just caused a familiar stubborn set comes to her jaw, her eyes suddenly alight with rage in return.

"Did you hear me? We *need* to talk."

"It was kind of hard to miss. Particularly as it seems that was already the case before you jumped me to fuck whatever that is that we need to talk about out of your system."

Bella is seething now but somewhere she takes the strength to swallow her comeback before this escalates into a real fight, and while part of me really wants to scream and throw things, I'm also glad she tries to keep things civil. Acting like children is really the last thing we need now – I'm just wishing I could stop the urge to do so as easily as she does.

"Probably. Yes. But maybe my need to fuck *you* was more important than spending the next hour hurling insults and accusation at each other."

When I don't reply she exhales loudly, then sits up as if staring down at me will lend her some kind of advantage.

"Okay, before the elephant sized misconceptions that are right now crowding this room start stomping us to mush, can we please just act like two adults for five minutes?"

"I was under the impression we were already doing that."

"No, you just sound like a rejected, snotty little boy."

Try as I might, my temper gets the better of me at that, although of course I know that she's right. Which is not helping this, either.

"The first thing you say that actually sounds right, why shouldn't I feel rejected when you so obviously still want to fuck him?"

"But so do you!"

In the momentary silence our heavy, angry breathing is deafening as we keep staring at each other, neither ready to look away or back down, but also reluctant to draw any sort of conclusion from this.

As before, Bella is the one who sees reason first, but considering that I feel like she's had some time to prepare for this speech while I've gotten whacked over the head just now that's only fair. She's still angry but now frustration leaks back into her posture, and when she surges to her feet her motions are as clipped and ragged as her words.

"There's no sense in this. Whatever I say right now just won't get through to you."

I watch in silence as she gathers her clothes, then throws them into the hamper before she dons a simple tank top and sweat pants. Even dressed casually like that she looks positively regal when she turns to face me again, her lips pressed into a thin line while she throws me a haughty look.

"I'm not the one you need to talk to right now. You need to talk to Jazz."

"Oh, I don't think so."

She only scoffs at my growl, then throws my own pants and a t-shirt at me.

"Right now I don't give a shit about what you think!"

"Do you ever?"

"Stop acting like such a freaking idiot!"

It's the first time that she actually screams at me, but contrary to most women, who look more comical than anything else when they throw a fit, Bella gets downright frightening. Some of the shock must have shown on my face as she calms down almost immediately, then hides her face in her hands for a moment, before she combs the sweaty strands back.

"Edward, please, for me, talk to Jazz. Or if you don't wanna talk, just listen to what he has to say. You really need to hear this, because nothing I could say would make sense any other way."

"You could just tell me."

"Certainly not," she scoffs, then actually whirls around when she sees me open my mouth to add another insult. "Of course I could, but I'm so done dealing with other people's shit, I'm not going to let him off the hook and resolve this for him. Man up, listen to him, that's all I'm asking of you. And then

we can have our talk."

Her words come out with a finality that I can't protest, but instead of reaching for the clothes I get up and stalk towards the bathroom.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she shouts after me, and I hear her light footfalls follow.

I've already reached the door to the adjacent room when I feel her hand on my arm, her grip surprisingly strong, but before she can pull me around I turn to her, nearly unbalancing her with the unexpected motion. Seething down at her I wait until she's looking into my eyes before I open my mouth to speak.

"I'm going to take a shower first, because I'm not going to have that kind of conversation with your sweat and cunt juice all over my cock."

She lets go of me so fast as if I'd slapped her, and whatever strength of will has kept her temper in check until now is not enough to keep doing so. Her cheeks darken with anger, and a low growl echoes forth between her clenched teeth.

"You fucking asshole!"

With that she whips around and stomps out, throwing the door closed behind her with a loud 'whack' that could have raised the dead. I'm too mad myself to really care just now.

The hot water is scalding my skin but I don't really notice, the turmoil inside of me too strong for much else to intrude into my unhappy bubble. My main problem is that once the most superficial anger evaporates along with the outer layers of my skin, common sense kicks back in and makes me feel foolish on top of everything else. Turning the temperature to something that won't boil me like a lobster I grab the body wash, then spend a lot more time just standing in the warm spray than it takes for the suds to be cleaned off. I don't turn when I hear the bathroom door creak open and close again in quick succession, but when I finally shut off the water and step out, I'm not surprised to find a neat bundle of my previously ignored clothes resting just inside the door, with a steaming mug of coffee beside it. The gesture is so typical for Bella – although she must still be raging mad at me, she knows that overworked and sleep deprived as I am, I need something to clear my head – that for a moment I feel like bashing my head repeatedly against the wall for shouting at her. I'm also sure that she's counting on causing that very reaction inside of me so I will do what she wants – but that doesn't change the genuine care it shows. And I know she only means the best – and if memory serves well, she usually is right, too.

I take my time toweling off, then stare at my reflection in the mirror until the part I've haphazardly wiped clean is fogged over again.

I really don't want to talk. I don't want to get dressed, don't want to drink my coffee, don't want to hear anything that Jazz has to say, nor do I want to talk with Bella about it. I just want to go back to bed, curl up and sleep, and when I wake again I want to pretend it all never happened and I can just go on with life as it is.

But I know I can't do that – and not just because Bella won't let me. I know that I have to man up and act like a responsible adult, and responsible adults don't run from conflicts.

I've clearly idled too long as a soft knock sounds on the door when I'm just done getting into my underwear, and I hurry to pull on the sweat pants.

"Are you decent?" Bella's voice chimes through the wood, the forced lightness of her tone telling plainly that she's still pissed.

"All the clothes in the world won't make me decent, but I'm dressed, if that's what you wanna know," I shout as I wrench the t-shirt over my head. There is a telltale pause, then I hear Bella's voice again, only lower as she doesn't talk to me.

"Go in. I don't think he's going to come out on his own any time soon, and I don't think it will help your cause much if we have to drag him out kicking and screaming."

I'm glad the door is still closed as I can't hide a grin at that, even though I'm still frowning, followed by a snort at Jasper's answer.

"Maybe I should just talk to him later. Maybe he doesn't want to talk right now."

"Of course he doesn't want to talk! But I'm done waiting for you muleheaded idiots to be ready to have your talks on your own time! I'll be old and gray until you get to anything by yourselves!"

"Do you think now is a good time to quote Robert Jordan -"

"Get the fuck in there, or I swear to everything that is holy, I will punch and kick you through that door, and we both know that you're too much of a wuss to hit me back, so just do it! Now!"

As much as I'm dreading what's to come listening to their exchange is incredibly amusing, and I have to actively wipe the mirth off my face when the door finally creaks open. Hiding the last of my somewhat wry grin behind the coffee mug I watch as Jazz enters, eyeing Bella warily over his shoulder the whole time. She takes a moment to stare at me balefully before she reaches for the door.

"Don't even think of coming out of there until you're done. Unless you need an ambulance, but then you can just holler down to where I'll be waiting in the living room."

Then she slams the door shut, the sound as ominous as her words. Jazz keeps staring at the closed door for a few seconds longer before he turns to me, clearly unwilling to catch my gaze but not backing down, either. I have no idea whether I'm glaring at him or not as my mind is completely wiped clean of any thought or emotion, and finally he harrumphs.

"Look, I really didn't know you were going at it just now, hell, I didn't even know you were there, Bella said you'll probably have to stay at the hospital until late, and -"

"I don't think that's the point of this conversation right now," I interrupt him, a little surprised just how neutral I'm sounding.

Jazz blinks, then clears his throat again.

"Guess not. But it's a start to try to explain that I'm not out to break the two of you up with my most malicious schemes, or some shit like that. Because I'm not. And there are no schemes."

Seeing him ramble nervously like that strangely eases me, and while neither the anger nor frustration go away, I feel a little less apprehensive about this.

"Just tell me what Bella thinks I need to hear. Because clearly the Cerberus huffing in the living room downstairs won't let either of us out of here if we don't get this over with."

"Easier said than done," he retorts.

"Always is."

Jazz falls silent for a moment, then leans back against the wall next to the towel rack, probably in an attempt to either look casual or assume a more comfortable position, but tensed up as he is it doesn't seem he achieves either. I take another sip from my coffee before I sit down on the counter, not exactly coincidentally where I've last fucked Bella without the universe trying to spoil our fun.

"So," he starts, but then doesn't go on, momentarily lost in studying the tiles on the floor. I let him stew for a while until my patience is threatening to disappear with the last bit of coffee.

"So?"

He finally looks up at me again and swallows thickly, and if it wasn't such an awkward moment, the way he's visibly trying to steel himself might have actually been rather amusing.

"So I think I should probably start by saying that I'm sorry. For what I did, back in spring, not that I think it's hard to guess anyway what I'm talking about. And I really am, but honestly, I think it would just sound phony and fake if I said it right now. Guess I should instead start with how I got to actually really be sorry for my actions."

I have to admit, he sounds both more sincere than I expect, and is more honest than I've ever thought possible.

"Start with whatever you want. I'm not going to interrupt you." And I really don't intend to, unless he gives me a real reason to punch him beyond those I already have. He seems to take my words for the shaky truce they are, and nods.

"Fair enough."

His eyes briefly snag away as if to resume the doubtlessly fascinating study of the tiles, but then he forces himself to catch my gaze again while he starts talking.

"Alice made me go to therapy."

He leaves the words hanging between us for a moment, and when I don't add anything, he goes on.

"One day in early summer she handed me this business card of this

'fabulous shrink'," he adds the air quotes with his fingers, "and pretty much told me to go see her. Sheila Cooper, sex educator and family therapist. I had a pretty hard time not laughing at first, then asked her if she thought that we needed counseling already, but Alice replied that it wasn't for us, just for me. She thought I needed to talk to someone about my promiscuous habits, and that if I really loved her, I would just do it. So I did it, ignoring the usual emotional blackmail, called and made an appointment, trying very hard not to sound as amused as I was.

"First time I went there, Alice came with me, then kissed me good-bye outside the building and told me she would be waiting for me in the café downstairs. I have to admit, if she hadn't been there I might never have gone inside. But I did, telling myself to just do this, tell that stuck up shrew I expected this Dr. Cooper to be whatever she wanted to hear, and be done with it."

He pauses here, but I don't add the comment that shrinks are qualified personnel, too that he clearly thinks I need to offer.

"Anyway, Sheila turned out to be very different from my expectations.

Younger, more attractive, a very keen eye for bullshit and no tolerance whatsoever for the same. I tried to work my charm on her for maybe five minutes, after which she shot me down hard. Then she asked me why I was here for real, and I bluntly told her that my girlfriend wanted me to see a shrink, but I didn't think that there were any issues to work on. Then I nearly fell over myself explaining that the no issues comment wasn't just avoidance or defensiveness or something, and she let me talk myself into deeper shit still for another five minutes. All without uttering a single word, and by then I was ready to tell her my life story.

"But all she finally said was, 'Okay, be that as it may, you don't have to convince me, just pay cash up front and we're done here.' I was so surprised that I didn't know what to say, clearly her ploy, and then she went on offering that maybe I might like to use this one time opportunity to just talk to a professional who wouldn't judge anything I said if I was already here.

"At first I really didn't want to, but she kept looking at me, so finally I explained again that I didn't think I needed to talk about anything. She asked why exactly my girlfriend wanted me to see her, so I replied that she thought I had been a little too easy with the ladies, which I didn't even deny, but she didn't know all the reasons, which if she did would have made this visit obsolete.

"'Shouldn't you tell her those reasons then? Honesty is important in a relationship, particularly if one partner feels insecure about something,' she asked, to what I replied, 'Well, the real reason why I fucked every available nice piece of ass is because I was waiting for her to realize she only wanted me after getting to see more of the world, or more cocks, whichever comes first.'

"I got a raised brow for that, then a succinct, 'There's a circle in hell reserved for people who feel cocky about lying to their therapists, you know?' which made me laugh. I told her it was still true, and

the fact that I felt like I had something to prove to myself for a while after the accident that left me incapable of jerking off for half a year alone, and after that it just kind of got a habit, being the rebound guy. To which she, 'Rebound guy?', and I, 'Yes, you know, the guy women pick up in a bar when they're still all torn up about the asshole who just left them, then have great sex with for one night, a week, or maybe even a month, and after that they move on because it was just sex. No harm done, fun for everyone involved, don't see that there's a problem.'

"I kind of expected her to at least be appalled, you know, the kind of most women get at that, but she just shrugged and said, all cool, 'So how does that make you feel, no longer being a manwhore?' I was really surprised at that, although I already started to wonder why, and asked her if she was like that to all of her clients. She shrugged and explained that it was her job to be what her clients needed – lending calm comfort and understanding for a nervous mother who just found out her child was gay and was simply too confused herself how to handle the situation well as a supportive parent; a strong sounding board for the cheated upon wife who was trying to get on with her life – but as she didn't get the sense that I required either, why should she keep up that pretense?

"She obviously had a point, so I told her that I didn't mind not sleeping with three different women in a week, and I was very happy with Alice. And added that I found it rather funny that she called me a manwhore as my best friend used to do that all the time.

"'So he did?' she wanted to know, in that typical way shrinks do. Had to correct her there - 'She, actually, my best friend's a girl.' I clarified. She nodded sagely at that and gave me one of those condescending looks, of course I had to set things straight. 'She's not a booty call. I mean, yeah, we had sex, but not like that. And it wasn't just her and me, but her, me, and her boyfriend. Who's been my roomie since college.'

"Of course then she wanted to know if my girlfriend knew you both. To which I, 'He's her best friend.' You should have seen that smirk she then put on. 'How long ago was that? The last time you had sex with them,' she wanted to know. Calculating quickly, I, 'Maybe three months ago?'

"'Might be a lucky guess, but could it be that *this* is the real reason you're here?' was her succinct retort. And not much I could say about that, right? I kind of gave her credit for weaseling that out of me as she did, so I figured, what the heck, before I ramble on about some random girls I don't even know the names of anymore, why not talk about that? It's not like I could say anything to Alice after she called the topic discussed enough.

"The weird thing, or guess professional side about her was that she didn't seem curious. Just someone who would listen. It was a bit unnerving at first, but then she started asking a few questions, so I told her how I met Bella when I moved with my family up North. How I met you in college.

More like random stuff then, really, until she asked how we got to have sex."

He pauses there, and I can tell that my utter lack of reaction is unnerving him, but not much to say about that. It feels strange listening to him recount our past like that with a nearly clinical detachment, then again I have no idea how often he has told the same tale already.

"So I told her the whole story about that weekend. How I'd met Jessica Stanley at the liquor store and she asked me how Bella was doing, and I was all, 'Why shouldn't she be doing great?', and that skank told me that Bells had walked in on her and that other hussy with Mike. That clearly surprised the good doc.

"Your incentive to have a threesome with your two best friends was one of them getting cheated on by their significant other having a threesome with someone else?"

"The thought crossed my mind,' I told her, but then had to explain why things were completely different, too. 'You have to know, my roommate, Edward, he had been carrying a torch for Bella for ages. Botched more than one attempt to tell her, too, and when she then hooked up with that loser, he was all 'Boohoo, I should have told her!', and obviously now was a good time to remedy that all.

"I then went on explaining, 'When I got home I didn't right away tell Edward, because I knew if I did that I'd have to go post bail later that day after he was done beating Mike to a bloody pulp. And I figured Bella would tell me herself when she was ready. Although judging from the way she stumbled around, lost and disheveled when she came over I knew she was done wallowing alone. So I grabbed Edward and told him. Of course he was, like me, ready to show Mike in detail what we thought of him, but before he could launch into any plans of vengeance I pointed out that he had something better to do. At first he was all, 'What the hell are you talking about?' but when I pointed out that now the day he had been praying for had arrived he got a little defensive, all 'And getting her drunk enough so she won't really remember if we fucked or not is your answer to that?' He can be a little slow at times, brilliant as he is when it comes to brainy things.'

"I told him to stop being such a moron, but getting her drunk wasn't the worst idea as it was the ideal out if for whatever reason his pining should not be requited. Ever observant Sheila then asked me why I figured that was such a big deal, and of course I had to tell her just what you do behind closed doors and otherwise."

Although I try to keep a straight face I must have grimaced at that as Jazz snorts.

"I told her that you're into kinky stuff. Whereas she raised a brow and asked me how I defined kinky, and I replied that you'd likely have my ass for colloquialisms like that, so clarified, 'He's into BDSM, all the way, takes it serious and all.' And I also added that while I didn't think it was Bella's thing, a little experimenting hadn't hurt anyone ever, but what did I know, maybe you had picked up on something I just didn't want to see. In hindsight it's always easier to see things like that."

When I don't react to his words yet again, Jazz sighs and goes on.

"Anyway, I could see she wanted to ask my opinion on the whole subject but instead went on with my recount.

"After a little more needling I finally had him far enough to say something to her. I mean, the worst thing that could happen was either her taking him seriously but being turned off, but they were always so close and comfortable around each other that I couldn't imagine more than a few awkward days to come from that. Plus, she could always pretend she had just imagined that offer if she was at least

tipsy by then. Second option, she doesn't take him serious and laughs her ass off – bad for his ego, but the way she was looking I couldn't imagine he would mind that much if it raised her spirits some. But more likely was what really happened – he told her straight out what he did, asked her if she wanted to try – and one look at her face and I knew he had her. Of course them being them they couldn't just seal the deal then, they had to spend the whole night avoiding each other while so obviously wanting the exact same thing, but they can be a little slow at times.

"Later, after she went home he was all, 'Oh noes, she'll never say yes!' but I didn't even get to tell him to stop moping because right that moment she called, and, guess what, of course she was interested. One would have thought that he would have been excited about this, but no, he got all anxious, started babbling about how he didn't want to scare her and stuff, at which point I joked that if he felt he needed a wingman, he'd just have to ask. I didn't think he'd really take me up on that, I mean, come on, the girl he'd been wanting for the last five years and now he has a real shot at it?

But he reasoned that she'd probably be more at ease as she'd never take me that serious as him, us being friends forever and all, so me sticking around might actually help her relax. I had to admit, she's a fine piece of ass so of course I didn't say no, and we agreed that either way, if this really was just a one-time thing, at least she'd get the most out of it."

He stops there again, probably because I'm frowning for real, and when he keeps looking at me questioningly I grunt.

"I really wasn't that whiny."

"True, not verbatim, but seriously, I've seldom seen you that out of your league. I'm still amazed that she didn't even get a whiff of that."

I don't reply, and when he realizes that I won't offer anything else, he resumes talking instead.

"I didn't really go into details about it, except telling Sheila that we all had fun, that I think we all got the most out of it, and that I was glad that afterwards you had your most meaningful confession of mutual love so that *finally* this whole pining was over. I also added that Bells and I didn't really have anything except maybe an awkward two minutes around each other, so it was all good, perfect match made in heaven.

"After that the doc was silent for a few moments, then offered, 'I presume that sooner or later your girlfriend learned about this?' Of course no sense denying it. 'She did. But she's okay with it now, because she knows that it's a thing of the past and won't happen again.'

"Of course she doubted that, so I explained that it really was a one-way road as neither of you'd ever want to have sex with me again.

"She, of course, 'And what has you so convinced about that? From what you told me about them they might be the kind of decent people who respect others being off-limit due to the exclusivity of some relationships, but sometimes that doesn't prevent the heart from wanting something else than the mind dictates.'

"She was perplexed when I laughed and told her that for that to happen both of you would first have to stop being royally pissed at me.

"See, Alice is the type of woman who loves to be shown how important she is to you. So I figured I needed some kind of gesture to show her that I really wanted her, above all else.'

"She to that, 'Sounds ominous.'

"Me, 'Well, I guess seducing a girl's boyfriend so she can walk in on you, then get angry enough to kick you out and tell you to fuck off, at which point you of course have to turn to your true love for her help and play the sympathy card along with the 'you're all I ever wanted' angle usually does the trick. Or so I thought.'

"There she wisely assumed that things didn't go according to plan. I was still pretty relaxed about the whole issue, all, 'Well, in the end it worked.

Just the fallout was a little more dramatic than anyone could have expected. But I'm sure they'll get over it eventually.'"

I couldn't help a scoff at that, and seeing the look of guilt so plain on his face eased some of the anger wanting to burst out of me.

"I really didn't think this could escalate like it did! I might be a manipulative asshole, but I never really thought what I did could come close to breaking you two up. I even thought I'd overdone it with the talking for Bella's sake because I was so sure that she'd start laughing at me any moment."

"Wait, you knew she was in the house already?"

For a moment a hint of a smirk appears on his face but it is gone the moment he realizes just how close I am to breaking my stoic demeanor.

"Yes, I knew, she wasn't exactly silent when she came in. And Alice had called me right after Bella left, so I knew that she'd be home in the next thirty minutes tops."

Nothing really new, but getting the confirmation of my suspicions is a lot less satisfying than one may think. I force myself to calm down as there is no sense in dwelling on that now – and I have a feeling that this is not the part he really needs to tell me, and as I won't hear the rest if I beat him to a bloody pulp now I restrain myself from even telling him just what I think of that whole move.

"That about concluded my first ever therapy session. Well, she did tell me that if I didn't find anything else to talk about we could always analyze why I felt the need for actions like that any day, but she didn't bug me again with it when I showed up the next week. And like this the next appointments went. I mean, I didn't really talk that much about the three of us, but about my sexual history in general. I think I surprised her when I told her that I didn't keep a black book, or that I didn't think I'd slept with a three digit number of girls. I'd even go so far that by the time I told her that I wasn't freaking out over admitting that I had liked my one time experimenting with another guy that I really had no need to be there except to pacify Alice. I also don't think either of us really expected that we'd make any kind

of progress. I just talked, she listened, but it wasn't anything I hadn't told anyone before. At least until the night the four of us went to that club, you know, where Bella had another spell of lethal foot-in-mouth disease and you ran off later?"

Even if I had wanted to forget, I couldn't have, and at my curt nod he goes on.

"She was really upset after that, when she left with us a while later. She was trying to hide it, but you know how bad Bella is at that. We stopped at a coffee shop because Alice wanted to get a cup, and while we others waited outside Bella rounded on me and got in my face, asked me just where I got off on still trying to ruin your relationship. At first I didn't even understand what she meant, until she nearly screamed at me that I should just stop riling you up. I didn't even know what to say, told her I'd just tried to make meaningless small talk with you, at which point she started crying.

I was totally at a loss then, and she only got a sniffing, 'Don't you even see what you've done?' out before Alice returned, which made Bella shut up again.

"I tried to ignore the unease creeping up in me then, and when the next week her birthday party went by without any problems I figured she'd just been drunk and ready to lash out at me as she couldn't do the same to you.

Then neither of us had much time to really meet up, and I thought everything had more or less settled when Bella called me to fetch Emmett because Rose was in the hospital already. And after that I couldn't really keep on pretending that everything was still okay."

He stops there and scratches his head, his gaze once again on the floor.

"Like you said, I told Alice about the accident that night. Figured she would at least throw a fit, but she was all calm and concerned, insisted that of course she wasn't angry or something, and it wasn't the end of the world that we wouldn't have kids on our own. And because things were going so well I also told her that my whole sleeping around was in parts due to that, and the rest just idle whiling away my time until I could be with her."

He looks up at me then, at the same time happy but so utterly frustrated.

"You should have seen her. It was as if suddenly the whole world made sense to her, all the pieces of the puzzle had aligned the right way. She was over the moon with joy and kept kissing me, and told me that I could just cancel the next appointment with my shrink because obviously I didn't need it anymore. And all through that the only thing I could think about was that whatever she said, *I* really needed to talk to Sheila about what had happened in the hospital.

"I called her the next day, affirmed that I'd be there at our usual day and time, but I told Alice I had canceled it. When I went that day I told my colleagues that I was leaving early to buy a present for Alice, one that I'd gotten the day before. Because sometimes she calls -" he stops there, then clears his throat. "She called at my office to ask if I was still there.

Presumably to surprise me, but I know that she was keeping track on me.

Of course I didn't want her to worry, so more lies to keep her happy it was.

"That was the first thing I told Sheila about. And the moment I started talking it all poured out of me. How much I loathe that she has to know every day what I do, who I talk to, who I meet. That I know that she reads my emails, checks my phone, even called a few of my co-workers when something didn't add up, like an impromptu informal brain storming session at the bar around the corner. That I'm trying so hard every day to make it all right, and whatever I do, it's barely enough to make her happy.

"And from that I seamlessly went on to recounting what had happened that weekend, and in the club, and all the other times the four of us had met, and how I'd even started to dread meeting Bella because I just knew Alice would be in a foul mood for days afterwards. Now on top of that Bella was suddenly so angry and downright hostile with me like never before, not even the day she kneed me in the junk, which made it so obvious to me that nothing was getting better. Just you acting vaguely like a friend was a good thing, and only when I told the doc about that did I realize just how much it bothered me that we weren't even talking anymore, let alone hung out. I think I was a veritable mess that day and really felt like I deserved it.

Before that I really didn't comprehend what I'd done, didn't fully know.

"Of course I asked Sheila what I should do, and for a moment I even expected her to gloat at me, but she only shrugged and told me that the first step in making things right always comes with starting at the lowest point. She advised me to talk to Bella, because why ever she was angry with me I knew she'd get over it fast. But I didn't even know what to say to her, so Sheila gave me some homework. Even made it sound so easy.

"'Sit down with a notepad and just write whatever comes to your mind. And keep writing. Not with the goal to tell anyone, but only between you and that notepad. Write everything down that you wouldn't even admit to yourself. Then burn it. Start anew. Until you find the things you can and want to tell her.'

"Sounded easy enough, so the next weekend when Alice wasn't at home again I sat down with a bottle of vodka and set to work. Didn't write anything for hours, but when I finally started, it was frightening how much I found to write down. And that's pretty much when I realized what I'd done, and how much I've been lying to myself."

This time when he stops he looks about as miserable as he sounds, and although I'm convinced that he has every right to feel like shit, I still can't help being at least a little sympathetic. As if he can read my mind, or at least part of my reactions from my body language, Jazz chuckles dryly and repositions himself against the wall.

"Don't feel too sorry for me yet, the best part I still haven't told you."

"I'm not exactly feeling sorry for you, don't worry about that," I shoot back, satisfied with the amount of resentment ringing in my tone. Jazz shrugs a bit uncomfortably, but then goes on.

"Be that as it may, I couldn't just burn the notepad. It was as if those scrawled pages held all that was true about my life that no one else knew about. I didn't want Alice to read them so I went to work on a Sunday evening to lock them in my desk, but couldn't do anything at all on Monday because they seemed to be staring at me accusingly. So I called Sheila, feeling insanely stupid about that in itself, and practically begged her to read them. I was so insanely glad when she agreed, I dropped everything I'd tried to work on before and just walked over to her office to drop the pad off.

"The days until our next session were endless. Alice constantly got on my nerves, then she wanted to know what was wrong with me and got pissed when I couldn't tell her, and on top of that she ran into Bella, then threw a fit for days because you'd canceled your wedding. It got to the point where I actually told her to stop being so ridiculous, which got me banned from the bedroom for the rest of the week. I didn't really give a shit because I wasn't in the mood for sex anyway, and you know that being ignored is the worst for Alice. I think the day when I finally got to Sheila again I was half expecting Alice to call at any moment to tell me that she was done with me, and right then I didn't even care, locked inside my head as I was.

"Sheila and I talked, for the first time really talked for hours, way past the usual end of my time with her. At first I was so weirded out that for this session she'd dropped her usual frank demeanor but somehow she dragged even more out of me than I'd written down. It was so exhausting but at the same kind liberating, although it left me kind of bleak and hollow."

I'm burning to ask him just what exactly has had him that much under the weather, but hold my tongue as he doesn't even halt in his monologue.

"In the end she asked me what I wanted to do now, where I saw myself.

And the answer was so easy – all I really wanted was Alice. Because I love her, even if she drives me insane, and while I had to look so much about myself in the eye that I'd never wanted to see, it didn't change anything about that. But it was obvious to me that things had to change, that it couldn't always be just about her, and that whatever I did still wasn't enough. Sheila encouraged me to tell Alice – not with blunt words but slow explanations, lots of stressing just what I felt for her and how much I loved her. So I did that."

This time his pause seems to invite a question from me, and after doing a quick calculation in my head I open my mouth.

"What did she say?"

"At first she was angry. Offended. I think mostly because she felt I had gone behind her back. Then she really started to think, and I guess felt a little guilty because what I oh so gently accused her of was true. She apologized. I apologized. I told her I loved her and that she meant the world to me. She told me she loved me, too. Then we made sweet, sweet love and everything was perfect."

I nearly laugh at the acerbic voice he uses for the last sentence, but his heavy sigh helps me not to appear like an even greater jerk than I think he is.

"Or so I thought. Be that as it may, Karma is a bitch, and I think I had it coming for a long, long time. Should have figured that the week of calm happiness couldn't last. But the way things started to go down was absurd.

Or not, as you wanna view it. Actually it was Bella who incidentally threw that first pebble that turned into an avalanche."

"You're really going to blame this on her?" I ask, immediately angry, but Jasper's guileless answer is priceless.

"Not blame, on the contrary, I should thank her for it. Tried to but she only punched me for it. But that's not the point. What she did was actually just being surprised. It was a few days later, early this month, when I got away early from one of my last meetings, and Alice called me that she was having drinks with Bella and that I should just come join them. When I arrived, Bella was about as angry at me as before, and I could tell that she and Alice had been arguing, so I tried to lighten the mood and congratulated her on not getting married. She actually laughed, and I think she was pleasantly surprised when she saw that I really meant it like that.

She hugged me when she left, which she hadn't done for a while, but I only got until we were home to be happy about that.

"Because Alice wasn't. At first she ranted about why Bella even felt the need to touch me, because that was clearly not normal. And when I defended her because, come on, Bella and I have always been the hugging sort, she got in my face and claimed I was only happy that you didn't marry because that way I could again end up with both of you. Or either of you, I'm not entirely sure because at that part she started screaming and got borderline incoherent. It all came so out of the blue for me that at first I didn't defend myself, which she just took for silent admission. In the end she was so far gone that she even said I was happy that she couldn't design the wedding dress and organize the party, and I was stupid enough to tell her that maybe this was exactly the reason why Bella was so happy about not getting married, because she didn't want it to be Alice's wedding but her own.

"At that she was suddenly all calm, and it all started anew, only that now she accused me of always taking Bella's side. And I told her that was not true, that I was always on her side, but she didn't listen. I even went so far and tried to explain to her what I thought was going on with Bella's hostility towards me, but it was like talking to a wall. The last thing that I really got to say was that if she wasn't such a self-centered bitch she would have seen months ago that things would never be the same between Bella and me.

To what she screamed, 'Because you fucked her!' at me, and I only got to say, 'No, because I betrayed her!' And after that Alice didn't speak to me for a whole week."

I really don't know what to make of that, but Jazz seems so far lost in the memories that he doesn't even wait for me to add anything.

"I tried everything to win her back, so to say. Flowers, candy, candle light dinner, nothing worked. Then from one day to the next she was all normal again, but at the same time distant. As if she was

just going through the usual routines without any feelings behind them anymore. I had two sessions with Sheila that week, and I think for the first time they were actually all about her field of expertise. I think she really wanted to tell me to just accept that things wouldn't work out anymore, but I just couldn't accept it. I was so ready to give up everything just for her.

"And then we had our last fight. I still don't know what caused it, I mean we were in bed and I was just -"

"I don't really think I need the details about that," I interject.

Jazz shrugs, but inclines his head.

"Sure. Either way, she suddenly shoves me away and runs out of the bedroom, screaming something like, 'I knew that you were just like him!' at me. No idea what she meant, and of course I followed her. Thought I'd find her either crying or screaming in the living room, but she just got herself a bottle of water from the fridge after tying her bathrobe around her, then turned to me and calmly told me that I should go because clearly this couldn't work.

"It wasn't really a surprise but I was still devastated. Cried, begged, but while I could see that she hurt, it didn't move her. Then I asked her why, and she told me that she didn't love me. That she'd always thought she loved me, but really, she had been deluding herself. That she loved the image of me that she had had in her heart for years, but that we both had to admit that I wasn't that guy, probably never had been, and that for our sake we should end it before anyone got really hurt."

This time when he stops I simply don't know what to say, and minutes pass in silence before he picks up again.

"I couldn't accept it, just couldn't, and begged her to give me another chance. That I would change, be the man she wanted me to be, but she just smiled sadly and asked me if I didn't see that this was exactly our problem. That no relationship can work this way, and that she couldn't be happy with someone who would so selflessly sacrifice everything. She also admitted that for months she'd tried to make me see that, tried to provoke me however she could, but I'd never just stood up for myself and told her to stop that shit right away. She couldn't deal with me being such a pushover, and she couldn't deal with the guy she knew I really was underneath it all, so there was no sense in continuing this.

"And of course she was right, but it nevertheless hurt like hell. Still hurts like hell."

Now I'm feeling like an ass for keeping my distance, but there's still so much he hasn't said that I don't feel I can bring myself to reach out to him and show at least some compassion. When he looks at me again I see that he knows all too well how I feel, and when he goes on I know that we've finally reached the really important part.

"That all probably makes more sense when I explain the rest. All the things I wrote down on that notepad that I just couldn't burn. The things Alice somehow picked up on without me ever having to tell her because despite of how much I thought she was living in a dream world of her own making, she knows me better than I know myself sometimes."

He exhales slowly as if to steel himself, then squares his shoulders.

"I was really surprised today when I asked Bella about the reason why she keeps acting so hostile towards me and she told me it was because of what I had said about you."

"That really surprised you? I remember telling you that myself," I grunt back. He frowns for a moment, then scratches his chin.

"Sure, but I figured her main reason behind it was that you'd finally told her how much of a fucking hypocrite I am, and that in that context she was angry at me for having said that. I still don't get why you didn't."

"I think you have to be a little more specific than that." Of course I know what he's referring to, but I seem to develop an unhealthy amount of joy hearing him admit things that clearly make him uncomfortable. The brief glare I get from him in return underlines that he knows what I'm doing, but he doesn't comment on my answering smirk.

"That you know very well just how much most kinky stuff doesn't repel me. I mean, you were there, on many occasions, seeing me get a hard-on over a girl getting tied up and spanked. And except for the really heavy stuff, I helped you with plenty of that, long before Bella walked into our house that afternoon. I don't think that she knew all that before I told her today."

"I guess it says something about the kind of guy I am that I don't feel I need to tell the world about intimate things you never really had the guts to acknowledge yourself."

For a few seconds we both just stare at each other, the silence heavy between us, until he lowers his gaze, looking ashamed. My resolve to just told my tongue and not react to what he says crumbles then, maybe because my fight not to undermine my own integrity by telling Bella about all that has cost me so much for so long.

"Did you really think I didn't know that all that was more for you than just an easy opportunity to get laid? I know you always pretended it was just that, but how does the saying go, like recognizes like? I know that you have a rather strong dominant streak, just as I know that there's not a single submissive bone in you."

The way his shoulders tense is telling that my words get under his skin like few other things I've ever said to him, but when he looks at me again he's surprisingly calm.

"I guess I knew that you knew, but that doesn't mean that accepting the truth behind it was easy for me."

At that I can only laugh, and it's a hard, humorless sound.

"Yeah, welcome to my world. Wanna know how much easier it gets when you have a best friend who gloats at you for it and tries to make the woman you love hate you for the way you are?"

It's obvious that he wants to shout a retort back at me but his lips stay pressed together, as if he knows

that there's nothing he can say to defend himself. Which is probably the truth. Strangely, that newly gleaned knowledge does nothing whatsoever to ease the rage boiling in my guts, in fact it only leads to even more frustration.

Until suddenly, something else he said makes sense.

"She knows, doesn't she? Alice knows. That's what she meant with 'You are just like him' – she meant you're just like me."

His loud, somewhat dejected sounding exhale is the only answer I get, but it's not enough for me.

"Just what the hell did you do to her?"

"I did nothing!" he shouts back, clearly agitated. "Nothing more than I've done plenty of times with her before! Not that you really wanna know, because you still see her as the pure girl seeking love who doesn't really have an interesting sex life -"

"Bullshit! I know she fucks round just as much as you, and I've heard my fair share of details! I don't give a flying fuck about what she does or what she likes, but I won't stand by while you do your best to drive us even more apart!"

Jazz looks as if I've slapped him, then quickly backtracks.

"Sheesh, calm down! I never tried to make her hate you, that's all her herself! The only thing I did was hold her down somewhat while I kissed her neck and shoulders and did my best to get her all worked up for some doggie style, I really don't think that anyone can say with a straight face that any of that is even remotely kinky."

He pauses, then goes on, clearly trying to sound calm again.

"I don't think she cares either way what Bella and you do. She just doesn't want me to be that way, and as I obviously am, she decided to ditch me. In a way that's even fair of her to cut me loose if she thinks she's holding me back or something, but I tried telling her that while yes, the physical side of BDSM appeals to me, I have no interest in doing any of that with her if that's not her thing, nor will I miss it, because I want to be with her because I love her, not because we had the best sex two people can ever have together. Yet clearly me holding anything back or putting her wishes over my own makes me a lying pushover, and if I don't do that she doesn't like what else could appeal to me. Either way I'm fucked, and she's off to greener pastures. Happy now?"

"Why should any of that make me happy?"

Jazz doesn't answer, then shakes his head.

"Anyway, losing my trek here. Although quite frankly, this is not a very easy conversation to have with you."

"So sorry I'm not exactly forthcoming with pity and understanding that you never showed to me."

Even before the words are out I know that I sound like a petulant boy again, but for whatever reason he just brings that side out of me. So I try to battle down my anger and purge the hint of satisfaction from my voice, and try again.

"Just talk, and I'll try not to make an ass of myself in turn, okay? This is dragging on enough as it is."

It's kind of funny to watch how he's still surprised that I'm able to act at least remotely civil, but then he goes on as if the whole flinging of accusations hasn't just happened.

"You know, the first threesome with Bella, that was really just sex for me. I don't think I really even saw her as herself – I mean, to me she'll always be something very close to my little sister who I have to protect, and although I know that she's grown up now and quite the force to be reckoned with if she wants to, it took me a long time to really catch on to the change she went through."

"No kidding."

"Hey, didn't you just tell me to talk?"

"But I didn't say I wouldn't comment on idiotic things you'd say," I retort.

He lets out a somewhat agitated breath.

"Whatever. That day that wasn't Bella to me, because as much as I was always curious about how it would be to have sex with her, my image of Bella didn't even overlap with the beautiful, sexual being kneeling before you with her hands tied behind her back while she sucked you off. She wasn't just any other girl, either, but there was nothing in me that had any reservations about what we did. And afterwards it all felt so right, for the

lack of another word. She was there, she was comfortable with me having been part of it, she was joking like she always used to before Mike made her believe that there was something wrong with hanging out with your not-same-sex best friends, and I have to admit, having checked one more what-if off the list was kinda neat.

"And then the second time started out all right, but for whatever reason I couldn't really shut down that voice inside my head that this was *Bella* we were doing all that to, and at the same time it made me feel kind of awkwardly guilty for enjoying teasing her so much, and ..."

He trails off there, but for once I don't feel like commenting myself. It takes a few moments until he resumes, his eyes again finding purchase on the tiles of the floor.

"I now know that you didn't really hurt her. I'm sure you two did a lot very soon after that that made her scream louder and was more physically testing. But it was a very convenient excuse for me to latch onto that – I mean, it was Bella, and I needed to protect Bella, and saying I just got into your face because you didn't take enough care was a hell of a lot easier than to say, hey, I actually really got off on seeing her writhe in real pain, and I want to do something like that, too – maybe not to her, but, who knows, if she'd want me to, why not? Just fucking her was so much less complicated, and it was something I could allow myself to feel good about.

And you really gave me an easy way out when you said that we didn't have to add anything kinky to any future threesomes.

"And the third one was great again, nothing that made me feel uneasy, we clearly all enjoyed it, and the little spat you and Bella had afterwards was probably overdue anyway, I told myself."

Another pause, and this time I just have to ask again.

"Really nothing that made you uneasy about it?"

His eyes zoom to my face, and for the first time he looks amused when he chuckles.

"No. Might sound strange, but I've never felt weird about kissing you. Or fucking you. Or being fucked by you. That part of my sexuality I own, and for whatever reason it's pretty much confined to you, if you've ever wondered. We've had sex, so what, that doesn't make me gay, nor would that really be an issue for me if it did."

"Fair enough."

My curt answer makes him snort, but then he sobers up rather fast.

"Still, I guess that's not the whole truth. Or I don't know, that part is hard to put in words because I'm actually not really good with sorting out emotions.

But something changed somewhere between our romp in the woods and the last threesome. I couldn't explain it then, didn't even really realize that something was going on besides a vague feeling of unease. I figured I just didn't want it to end, because things were working really well with the dynamic we had established, it was all so comfortable and low maintenance, but at the same time so much more than just meaningless sex – and one thing I think I really regretted from the start was telling neither of you any of that.

"But on the other hand I was glad I didn't. You both made it clear that for you, this was a final thing. I accepted that at first because, well, it was pretty obvious that Alice was once again willing to try something more permanent than a booty call and I really didn't want to botch that. But when I watched you both how you were acting, I realized that you both actually didn't want me in the picture anymore. Bella got all bored, and you did pretty much everything possible to stake your claim on her – and while the rational part of me was glad about that and could reason that it was a good thing so I wouldn't feel I'd miss anything if things with Alice really worked out, it still hurt. And I didn't understand why, didn't *want* to understand why, and that somehow made me feel even more rejected."

All the while he has been occupied looking everywhere but at me, but for the last few sentences his gaze keeps seeking mine, and I really can't read the look on his face. When nothing comes from me in reply, he finally goes on, but the words come slow, clearly reluctant.

"I pretty much felt like shit and couldn't come up with a reason why. Then I tried fucking that frustration out of my system, but I didn't even see the girls, nor did I care about what we were doing.

And then I came home and Bella was sitting in the kitchen, and the way she looked at me, with so much revulsion and disappointment -"

A pained sigh follows.

"That was when something in me snapped, and this really fucked up plan started building in my mind. Part of me still wanted to just tell you both that I wasn't okay with this being the end, but I just couldn't do that, so I kept telling myself that I had to do everything I could to make sure that I ended up with Alice. And you know that there are two things she can't resist, being important, and being needed.

"It took three tries for me to even make it out of my room when I knew that now was the time I had to act. I was so locked in the conflict inside my head that I didn't even consider that upset as you were about your issues at work, things might take a different turn. I knew I was playing on Bella's insecurity with this but after the fight you had, I really thought she was over it and knew that she was everything for you, because to me it was so obvious that she was the *only* thing you cared about."

He swallows thickly for a moment as he goes on, and I can't shake off the feeling that the last sentence holds more meaning than it seems.

"Anyway, it was disturbingly easy not to care about the fallout because in a way I wanted to hurt you both. For rejecting me, ignoring me, for simply putting me into this messed up state that I couldn't handle. And I was so caught up in being glad I could pull the whole stunt off at first that I didn't realize that I hadn't just thrown you both off guard, but pretty much opened up a rift between you. Then you kicked me out and I already had Alice on speed dial, and things kept working smoothly for then. Of course she took me in, and I had to tell her something, and the truth wasn't exactly an option. She also wouldn't have believed me if I told her you were responsible for anything because quite frankly, in her eyes you still can't do wrong. And I couldn't exactly admit that I was a scheming, lying bastard, so Bella had to take the brunt. I knew Alice and she never really got to be close friends and I figured things would smooth over fast enough, but from there on everything turned towards the worst.

"Alice wasn't amused with Bella finally growing up, and I was too stunned at first how readily she accepted what I told her to do damage control. Then we were at the gala, and things just kept snowballing and spinning out of control, and like a train wreck, I could just watch and think 'oh shit' all over in my head. But at the end of the day I went home with Alice, and except for a few rocky days I thought I had avoided the worst of the fallout and things were well all around soon again."

He falls silent then, and it's obvious that this time he's waiting for me to say something, but I can't think of a good reply. Most of what he tells me isn't that much of a surprise – at least not since my great revelation from my talk with Rose – but just reliving it all again leaves me rattled. And of course there's that part about how our last threesome has made him feel that I really don't know how to deal with. Part of me wants to apologize for being so blind. Part of me wants to call him a fool for not just saying something.

And the fact that while it really seems as if he never wanted to break us up, he still has just admitted to wanting to hurt us grates in a way I haven't felt in a long, long time.

"Well, that's pretty much it," he finally speaks up again. "You know, now would be a good time for a statement." When I remain silent he sighs, then rubs his face with his hands. "Guess I don't deserve one. Either way, now you know my side of the story. And I hope that when I tell you now that I'm sorry about causing so much pain to everyone involved, that it's the truth. I really didn't think, not for a moment, that things could blow so out of proportions. If I could go back in time, I would tell myself to forget that insane idea the moment it came to my mind, and grow a pair and tell you guys that – I don't know. I'm not happy with things ending like this. That while I want to be with Alice, I'm not sure that will ever work or is everything that I want. And -"

He inhales sharply, then looks me right in the eye as he goes on.

"And that while I will always see Bella as my incestuously attractive childhood friend, somewhere along the way you became just a little more than my best bud who I occasionally fuck other girls with. Not in a Brokeback Mountain kind of way, but there's something I can't deny there.

And if I'm no completely wrong the fact that you needed a good five months to even talk to me again I don't think I'm the only one who feels that way."

This time the stretching silence between us is deafening, but I'm reluctant to even think about his words, let alone offer any kind of response to them, and after what feels like a small eternity Jazz sighs heavily for the last time.

"Guess that's everything I can say. After Alice kicked me out I came to you because you two are my friends. I just couldn't be alone then, and even the most awkward and uncomfortable welcome I could hope for seemed like a better idea than holing up in a motel out of town. I guess in a way I was also hoping that just sticking around would sooner or later give me the backbone to talk to you both to start mending the bridges I'd burned. And as much as I know I don't deserve a second chance, any second chance really, part of me still hopes that I didn't weld all doors shut behind me that day and threw away the keys. But I really don't expect that to be the case.

Just, you know, if you wanna kick me out now, just say it, or if you feel really vindictive, now you have ammo aplenty for any kind of payback. I know I deserve that. Although I'm also kinda hoping you keep to being the integrity loving kind of guy who doesn't take too much pleasure in kicking idiots when they're down."

More uncomfortable silence follows, and when he looks practically ready to burst with tension, I finally force my throat to start working again.

"I really need to talk to Bella now."

My voice sounds strangely raspy, and the words are clearly none that he expects, but after a moment he nods and turns towards the door.

"Sure, I'll tell her. Thanks for listening."

I can't even bring myself to offer a 'You're welcome,' then and he finally opens the door, leaving me

on my own, and strangely feeling alone. I wait until I don't hear his steps on the stairs anymore, then drag myself into the bedroom where I flop down onto the rumpled duvet and hide my face in my hands.

She's nearly soundless when she enters the room, but it's as if all of my senses are just there to seek her out, and I look at her from between my splayed fingers. She's standing next to the bed, out of reach but close, her arms crossed over her chest in a defensive stance, but there's no tension in her body. Bella looks as drained and tired as I feel, and as the seconds tick by I feel her very presence chase away some of the darkness lurking inside of me.

"Are you still angry with me?"

She offers a small but real smile at my question, but it doesn't counteract the sadness in her eyes.

"Only if you keep acting like a complete moron."

"Promise, I'll try to keep the moron inside of me in check."

"Good," she graciously accepts, then moves closer until her legs bump against my knees. We keep staring at each other, both unwilling to be the first to say something, until she sighs and looks away.

"I guess now you know why I told you that we need to postpone this talk until you know -"

I don't even let her finish the sentence.

"Yes."

"Good," she repeats as she lets the air whoosh out of her body. "Then, let's talk. Or rather, as you don't really seem capable of doing enough thinking right now for a real conversation, I will talk and you will listen, okay?"

I nod, both relieved and weirded out at the same time. I have no idea when exactly that happened, but she's obviously able to read me like an open book.

Bella takes a deep breath, and as she begins talking her eyes never stray from my face.

"I have to admit, most of what Jazz told me today didn't really come as a surprise. And the rest made sense in the way of the last pieces of a puzzle game falling into place. Maybe because I didn't spend the last six months trying to be someone I wasn't, nor did I try to cut parts of myself out and flush them down the drain – and the irony that I don't even know who of you I'm referring to with that doesn't escape me."

A brief pause, then she goes on.

"I think I kind of waited for us to have this talk ever since my crash. Which is in a way ironic as it was thinking about everything a lot for the first time in my life actually made me hate Jazz for real, but a lot of it was pent up frustration that I just couldn't vent. I was so close to asking you just what you

are or were really feeling for him then, but I knew that it was too soon, that you simply needed more time to work things through and maybe realize a few things on your own. I knew that I'd have to be the one to steer conversation to that topic, but I'm kind of used to by now that any uncomfortable stuff ends up being my responsibility, I can deal with that."

Again she halts, and I still don't know what to say. When that becomes obvious, she resumes.

"In a way I'm even glad he burst in on us today, because quite frankly, I think I would have gone insane any day now if I got any more frustrated."

Bella laughs a bit shakily, but her gaze remains trained on me.

"Before I get lost in my own not quite coherent thoughts, I think I should state a few facts that I've come to accept and know a while ago. First, I love you, and you love me. The kind of unconditional love that endures a lot, and if for whatever reason our relationship wouldn't work out, it would very likely leave us both raw and hurting until the end of our lives."

Just her mentioning of that makes my stomach clench so much that it's actually painful, but before I can speak up, she goes on.

"I can't say when things between us changed from just being madly in love to this. I just know that the evening of the gala, when I came home with you, I made the promise to myself that I would fight with all I had to give this love between us a chance, that I would let it bloom and grow strong and endure forever if I could help it. I don't think that anything can come between us from the outside, that it would take an active decision from either of us to end things to really break us apart. And I don't see anything in the world right now that may come up that can do that. Certainly not that moron current curled up on our couch."

She allows herself a small smile then that seems at odds with her words at first, but as she goes on the sadness slowly leaks from her body.

"I'm not saying that I know that you ever had any feelings for him, or still have, because you're the only one who knows whether that's the case or not. But I want you to know that if you still do, I don't feel threatened by that, nor would it be the end of my world if I'm not the only one you care deeply about. I have to admit, it's not an easy thing for me to say, and I don't think I could accept just anyone else, but Jazz is different. The

same as I didn't mind having sex with him, possibly having him be more than just a friend to you doesn't bother me all that much. I won't push you to come to any conclusions or decisions or whatnot. If you need time, from my side you have all the time in the world. I'd just like to remind you that if the answer is yes, you still have feelings for him, and yes, you still want him, and yes, you're glad that I so don't mind threesomes and this bed is by far large enough for one more person to sleep in, you should probably not take another six months to realize that, because I think being left hanging like that will break him."

Bella keeps looking down at me for a while, before she crawls onto the bed until she's crouching over

me, her eyes so close to mine now that I nearly can't focus on them anymore. Closing the distance between us, she kisses me, first with just her lips brushing against mine, then a deeper kiss with her tongue in my mouth and her fingers combing through my hair. For a while I just let myself get lost in the sensation, then bring my hands up over her thighs to her back until I can pull her as close to me as possible. She gradually shifts until she ends up lying on her side pressed against me, her lips never leaving mine.

"I love you."

Simple words but they hold so much when I rasp them out, and she gifts me another of those sad but real smiles.

"I know. Never doubted that. And won't start now, either."

We remain staring into each other's eyes for a long time, so close, and not just in a physical sense. I know that she is waiting for me to say something, but it's hard enough to think as it is. When I finally break the silence, the only thing that leaves my lips is, "I don't know."

Bella is silent for a moment, then lets one of her hands slide down to stroke my cheek softly.

"Don't know what?"

"What I want to do now. If I still feel anything for him. If I even want to."

She blinks for a moment, taking in my words, and I can tell that they surprise her a little.

"You don't know or you don't want to know?"

The doubt in her voice makes me laugh, but it's a dry, pained sound.

"I'm not just another idiot in a long line who's been living in denial. I really can't say. It would be so much easier if it were just that, then I could just stop trying not to

whatever it is I do. Like him, need him, want him."

A light frown appears between her brows, and for a moment I get lost in studying the elegant curve of her mouth.

"But there was a time that wasn't so?"

My pained inhale is all the answer she needs, but true to her previous words, she doesn't seem horrified or even put off.

"But you got over him?" she presumes.

"Kind of."

"That's not a no."

"But also not a yes."

We keep looking at each other then, and after a while it all just gets too heavy for me.

"Do you mind if I just hold you?"

"Of course not," she whispers, then brushes another kiss over my lips before she turns around, ready to be tugged into my embrace. I mold my body against hers, with her head pillowed on one of my arms, while I snake the other over her abdomen. We stay like that for a while, our fingers entwined over her stomach, both of us lost in thought.

I have no idea how much time has passed – it feels like hours, but has probably only been minutes – when I hear her clear her throat.

"You know, I really miss what we had. And I'm not even talking about the mind-blowing sex. Just us. Like after that first threesome, when we were

all lying in a heap of limbs on the couch with two boxes of pizza and a movie playing, and life was just so uncomplicated. I want that back."

Her words make me yearn for just that, but I know that we can never go back to that. Too much has happened. When I tell her that, she's silent for a moment.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why can't we go back to that?"

"Uhm, because of the whole shit that went down?"

"That's maybe a reason to make it harder to get there again, but it didn't just turn our lives into a one-way road."

I'm stunned for a moment, and Bella uses that to turn over slightly until she can look back at my face.

"We're living in a relationship where expressing our love for each other comes with things like you letting a scary woman cane the soles of my feet.

We already make the rules for our world – there's nothing impossible there if we just want to make it happen. Stress on *if* we want."

"I feel like we're going in circles."

"Not really," she snorts, then get serious again. "The real question right now isn't what was, or what is, but what we want it to be. Do you want Jazz to be with us again? I'm not talking about you falling head over heels madly in love with him. No solution that will work as it is until the end of our days.

But right now, do you still want him? Or do you want him to be gone from our bed and house forever?"

I mull that over in my head for a while.

"No."

"No as in you don't want him anymore?"

"No, I don't want him gone."

We keep looking deeply into each other's eyes for several moments longer, before I slowly extricate myself from her, then draw her to her feet with me.

Never losing eye contact I kiss her one last time before I take her hand in mine and gently tug her towards the door.

"Come on, I think we already lost enough time in the last six months."

Chapter 26

My resolve falters when I reach the top of the stairs leading down into the living room. It's only a moment, barely long enough for Bella to walk by me so she ends up being the one to tug me after her and not the other way round, but in those seconds panic grips me hard. Suddenly I don't know what to do because everything seems like the perfect recipe for disaster, and I just want to go back and hide in the bedroom until-

But this is where my thoughts grind to a halt and I'm able to calm myself again. I've been hiding and waiting for months, and a quick glance at the set of Bella's jaw tells me that she thinks now is the best time to stop doing that and move on.

Moments later we reach the room below and Bella lets go of my hand, but only after caressing my forearm lovingly.

"I'll go make some more coffee," she murmurs softly, then leaves me standing there on my own.

Looking over from her to where Jazz is sitting on the couch, I have to fight a new wave of apprehension, but one of a wholly different kind than before.

The way his shoulders tense I can tell that he's aware of our presence, but he doesn't yet look up from where he's slumped, his face buried in his hands. I try to remember if I've ever seen him that down, but come up blank. Not even after Alice has kicked him out has he seemed so lost.

I hate seeing him like that, even more so because I'm part of the problem.

And with that realization comes another – I'm so sick of feeling like shit all the time, with everything being plagued with issues and every situation about as awkward as it can get.

Using my newfound resolve to change that, I sit down on the sofa on the far side from Jazz. He doesn't move for a while, but then I hear him sigh softly as if he's gathering his strength. When he finally straightens and looks at me he's still weary, but I can see in his eyes that he's trying to steel himself for what's to come. Guess I can't hold that against him.

"If you want me to go, just say so, I'll spare you the bother of having to kick me out."

"No one's going to kick you out," I reply, surprised at how steady my voice sounds when inside I'm still feeling like I'm totally blindsided.

Jazz looks surprised for a moment, then accepts my words with a nod, and we both keep staring at each other until Bella joins us with the coffee.

"Gee, tone it down a notch, both of you, you're making my skin crawl with all that heavy, meaningful silence," she jokes, then sits down. Just not between us where there's the most space on the sofa, but on my left, squeezing herself between me and the armrest at the end of the seat. To make room for her

I have to move towards Jazz, and I pointedly glance at her less than subtle hint, which she of course ignores.

The silence continues to stretch in all its awkwardness while we're busy caffeinating ourselves. And it just keeps getting worse by the minute, until finally I've reached a point where I just can't let it drag on anymore.

Straightening, I lean back, not quite incidentally snaking my arm around Bella to keep close to her. She smiles a little at that but doesn't comment, nor does she lean into me, either.

Turning back to where Jazz is studying us, I try to come up with something worthwhile to say, but as my mind is still sluggish, I decide to stick with being blunt. So far that has served us all well today.

"I'm so sick of all this shit." Jazz frowns at my words but holds his tongue, and with a loud exhale I force myself to go on. "I'm sick of feeling like a dumb fuck, and I'm sick of everything being so difficult and awkward. We've all made mistakes, and we'll have to deal with this mess eventually, but something has to change, now."

I can feel Bella's silent approval from my side, but Jazz still looks doubtful.

No wonder, considering that both he and Bella did a lot of talking, in the bathroom and afterwards respectively, while I've mostly kept my thoughts to myself.

Looking down at my hands for a moment, I force myself to take the next step.

"I had thought that I was done with you, but listening to you and Bella today has made me realize that I still want you. Not in a mushy, 'oh I've been so heartbroken over losing you' kind of way, but simple, primal need. I want to fuck you, no more, no less."

A hint of a grin starts showing on Jasper's face, but I go on before he can get his hopes up.

"But that doesn't mean I'm over what you did, or that either of us has forgiven you. It just means that we're willing to give you a chance." I deliberately stress that I'm talking for both Bella and myself, and when I stop there she picks up the thread effortlessly after squeezing my thigh.

"And by chance we mean one chance. Don't fuck up or I will personally kick you out for good."

The underlying rage in her voice is scary, and it has a satisfyingly sobering effect on Jazz.

"I won't mess up, I promise," Jazz tries to interject, but Bella isn't done yet, and a look from her is enough to make him shut up at once.

"We'll see about that. I just need you to fully understand what I mean."

Edward and I have moved forward a lot since our last threesome, both as a couple and in the playroom. As much as I'm happy to have you back with us, I won't let you come between us. I'm sure Edward will enjoy teaching you a thing or two if you want that and letting you be his sidekick, but I

could never see you as my Dom. I also don't need you to be my knight in shining armor, because this damsel here really loves being in distress. If something freaks you out I expect you to just go and leave us to what we want to do, and later we can talk about it. But you can't intervene on my behalf, so to say, because I really don't want you to, and the last thing I need is Edward second-guessing himself just because what I need him to do makes you uncomfortable. Get that?"

"Loud and clear. And don't worry, I won't even try."

Her snort is derisive, but she leaves it at that, obviously happy to have that conversation for another time. Jazz looks sincere enough that I don't think this matter needs any more stressing, but I'm relieved that Bella has been the one to tackle it - however he might really be feeling about it, hearing it from her will leave more of an impression than if I had said it.

"Good, now that that's settled I guess we can move on, right?"

They both look a little surprised at my forced happy tone, but I don't dwell on that.

"Of course we can spend weeks now, or even months, to slowly re-establish our friendship and take baby steps to see just where this will lead to, but somehow I get the impression that none of us would really be happy with that. Let's face it, you want to fuck me, I want to fuck you, and Bella's a step away from happy feet at the thought of being the filling in that sandwich, so why wait?"

Jazz nearly chokes on his last sip of coffee at my words, then turns a partly lopsided grin at me.

"You don't really believe in beating around the bush anymore, I take it."

"Nope. Every time I tried to be subtle about something instead of stating blunt facts it ended in a mess. I'm done with that. Got any problems with that?"

"None, whatsoever."

"Great, are we done with this yet? Because I really need to get laid, now that the number of available cocks has doubled for me."

Jazz looks from Bella to me, then back to her and chuckles.

"You don't do subtle anymore, either, I see?"

She laughs, then gets up in one lithe motion as she shakes her head.

"Subtlety is so overrated, if you ask me."

Leaning down she plants a single, gentle kiss onto my lips, murmuring a soft, "Don't be a stranger," before she walks over to Jazz. The fact that she has to squeeze herself between the coffee table and me doesn't hamper the near predatory grace of her movements, her eyes never leaving Jasper's, not even when she straddles him and crosses her arms loosely behind his neck. Although her tits are right in front of him he keeps gazing into her face, as if he's still searching for something there.

I half expect her to play coy and bite her lip, or add another remark that will dampen the intensity and turn it into something more comfortable, but she doesn't. Instead she makes him tilt his face up more by bringing her own close to his, then kisses him, slowly but passionately. He hesitates for a moment, then joins in, his hands kneading her hips just where her tank top has ridden up, revealing a sliver of warm, smooth flesh.

I also expect some of the residual jealousy that has been riding shotgun throughout our last threesome to rear its ugly head, but watching them just makes me unbearably horny.

Bella breaks off the kiss by leaning back enough to grin at Jazz, her fingers idly playing with his hair.

"Does that feel weird to you?"

He shrugs, still focused on her, the motion letting him push up her top a couple of inches more.

"A little, as usual."

Not the reply she's been waiting for, but she laughs it off easily enough.

"But is that a problem for you?"

"I'd say that's part of the appeal," he answers, then shifts his grip so that his hands steady her back as he leans forward in turn, licking along her clavicle and up the side of her throat. Bella laughs breathily as she turns her head to give him better access, the motion also making her look over at me. The lust darkening her eyes makes my cock respond instinctively, but she still seems to feel the need to encourage me.

"Why don't you come a little closer? It's creepy when you just sit there and stare at us."

She even adds a pout, as if I don't know that she's teasing me, but instead of following her lead I remain where I am.

"Maybe because you two are so hot together that I just want to watch you for a while?"

My reply makes her laugh, the sound turning into a squeak when Jazz grabs her ass and pulls her closer, burying his face in her still covered tits.

He joins in her laughter then until she attacks his neck, causing him to squeeze her ass harder while she grinds her hips against his. His head lolls to the side then and now it's him looking over at me, once he opens his eyes again. The intensity in his gaze draws me in, and I already feel myself getting up when he agrees with Bella's previous assessment, offering a snorted, "Yeah, creepy."

I don't really know what exactly I should do then, so I just sit down closer to them, and again Bella takes the lead. Sliding down from Jazz's lap and turning around, she ends up wedged between us, and while he's busy kissing her neck again, she turns her face to me. Never one to pass up such an invitation I press my lips against hers, my tongue deep in her mouth until I make her moan against me. Sliding my hand up her side I grab her right tit and squeeze it, then let my fingers find her nipple to

rub it gently. She arches her torso into my grasp and moans again, this time clearly encouragingly, so I do the same with her other breast.

Bella's hand soon finds her way into my sweat pants, eagerly grabbing my already hardening cock, but then she turns her head away, breaking our kiss, to glare at Jazz.

"Your jeans are a problem. Off!"

He grins at her but doesn't make a move to obey her command, although the bulge in his pants shows that he's obviously not opposed to her hand rubbing over the denim as it is. Instead he reaches up and grabs her head to kiss her roughly, causing an indignant squeal from her that doesn't really sound like protest. I use the opportunity to bite down on the exposed side of her neck, adding to her distress. I've nearly forgotten just how much fun teasing her like that has always been, and the way she keeps stroking my cock she doesn't seem to mind herself.

When he lets go of her hair again Jazz accidentally brushes against my right arm, and for a moment my skin where he has touched me seems to tingle. I can't even rationally explain why, with most of Bella's body mashed against mine that little bit of additional contact shouldn't matter, but it does, and judging from the cautious look on his face I'm not the only one feeling it. I wonder if I should touch him in turn, but it seems as if I'm not yet quite there yet. Bella doesn't miss us both freezing for a few seconds, but her incessant squirming against us quickly diverts our attention back to her.

"I don't know about you, but I'm wearing too much. Anyone in a mind to change that?"

Jazz hesitates a little so I take up the challenge and draw her closer to me so that her back is pressed against my chest. I mash my lips against hers hungrily, then slide my hands underneath her already hitched up tank top.

She's only wearing that and her yoga pants so I take my time, instead of undressing her I resume teasing her nipples. They are obviously still more sensitive from getting pierced not long ago, but as far as I can tell that's more of an advantage than a hindrance.

Jazz shifts so that he's crouching on the sofa now, then moves closer so that he can run his fingers over the exposed skin at her hips and slide them into her waistband. When he incidentally touches my thigh this time it doesn't make me pause again, nor when he not so incidentally strokes my left forearm before he pulls her tank top off over her head.

I shift my grip on her tits then so that I'm cupping them from underneath as I push them up and together, in a way offering them to him. Of course he looks at them – what guy wouldn't? - and it's funny to watch his eyes widen as he becomes aware of the recent changes neither of us has yet felt the need to inform him of. Leaning further back against me Bella chuckles, then strokes her nipples invitingly.

"You like?"

"Oh, me like a lot," Jazz replies, his eyes still glued to her breasts. Then they snap up to my face, a hint of a frown on his. "Your idea?"

I don't know if I should be offended or amused at the assumption, but decide to let it go.

"Nope, all her idea."

"All?"

"All," I confirm with a smirk, then continue to ravage Bella's mouth while my fingers keep digging into her tits. Jazz eventually overcomes his shock and picks up where he has left off before by dragging Bella's pants down her legs. Tease that she is she keeps her knees together so that he doesn't get a better idea of what said 'all' entails, but once she's naked herself she starts working on the fly of his jeans, unhindered by my hands still kneading her breasts.

It takes a little shuffling and tugging to get Jazz out of his jeans, and I can tell from the way Bella keeps fumbling that she wants me to help. I'm more reluctant to let go of her tits than touch him, which makes me pause once again, but I'm not one to dwell on things like that for long. We end up kneeling on the couch with Bella perching on the edge of the coffee table, and I can't really bring myself to look away when Jazz catches my gaze.

Following a spur of the moment impulse I grab his head and kiss him, telling myself that I should quit stalling after my dramatic speech from before. The taste, scent, feel of him invading my senses is still so familiar, yet oddly strange at the same time.

The kiss only lasts a few moments as we both pull away from each other when Bella utters a guttural sound, instantly feeling guilty about taking it that step too far, but when my eyes find hers she just looks back at me with confusion plain on her face.

"Why did you stop?"

"Because of you?" I offer, but I already feel the iron grip of my bad conscience slip away. She's so obviously neither horrified nor distressed, at least not in that kind of way. Jazz is already chuckling under his breath when she finally catches on, rolling her eyes at me.

"Seriously? Don't you think I've had ample opportunity to freak out today?"

Why should watching you kiss do the trick now? You know that I've always found that hot." Her gaze then turns cunning as she looks from me to Jazz, and back again. "You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about watching you two getting it on. Might even say you owe me the real thing now."

"Is that so?"

She shrugs at my question, still unperturbed.

"Well, no sense denying it, right? And as much as I love being the center of attention, I don't need that all the time. In fact, if you'd ask me what I'd want to happen now I'd say I wouldn't care either way as long as it all ends with one cock in my pussy and the other in my ass."

The way she keeps looking from one of us to the other states clearly what she means with that, but

when neither of us makes a move Bella sighs, leaning back.

"I really don't want to talk you into anything, but don't hold back on my account. I'm sure I can find a way to keep myself occupied while you get, ah, reacquainted with each other. That is, if we can maybe suspend our rules for tonight?"

I guess the fact that I haven't even considered the implications of her getting herself off is telling the state my mind is in right now, but strictly speaking, her previous assault in itself would have been enough reason for serious punishment if I had wanted that.

"Fuck the rules."

It's comical how happy my words make her, but then her grin turns rather lewd.

"Shall I get the lube from upstairs? I'm sure I'm going to need it for myself, and I don't mind sharing."

I just nod, then watch her naked ass as she gets up and walks over to the stairs. Jazz seems equally transfixed by the show – and Bella's tattoo showing on her naked back – but he's looking over at me then as if he's feeling my gaze on him.

For several seconds we just stare at each other, the tension between us palpable. At my nod he comes a little closer. He leans towards me, slowly.

Getting a little impatient, I don't wait for him to finish the motion but kiss him myself, a little less hastily than the first time. His hand is on my shoulder, kneading the muscles there, and I can feel my whole body respond to him.

Yet very soon our kiss is gaining in passion and momentum, urgency gripping us both with desire riding shotgun. My hand sneaks under his t-shirt to his side to pull him closer still and he eagerly complies, moving in so that he's partly perching over me.

We're so caught in the moment that neither of us notices Bella's return, but her eager lips latching onto the side of my neck while her hand appears inside my pants around my cock again is most welcome. My head is spinning with need from the overwhelming sensations all around, and it's easy to get lost in them.

Somehow we end up naked, our clothes discarded strategically around the couch, and I'm once again kissing Bella hungrily when I feel her and Jazz shift. I try to pull away from her to see what is going on but she doesn't let me, her hands gripping my head with unerring determination. Then I feel another hand stroking down over my chest to my stomach, and a moment later it wraps purposefully around my hard cock.

A low moan leaves me, partly obscured by Bella still sucking on my tongue, but then she moves back, a veritable leer on her face as she looks down to where Jazz is beginning to stroke me. They both share a look, then Bella slides down until she's crouching next to where Jazz is kneeling now between my spread legs, her fingers drawing idle lines along my thigh.

"Just tell me if you need help. Or a few pointers."

He smirks at her while he brings his other hand up to cup my balls, squeezing them in turn with his stroking.

"I'm good. If you don't mind I'd like to try myself. Let's see how well fantasy translates to reality."

I really don't feel like protesting about being left out of their conversation, even less so when Jazz then leans forward so he can slide my cock into his mouth. Bella seems most amused by my resulting moan, then slaps Jazz playfully on the ass like one would do with a horse.

"I'll find something else to occupy myself with," she informs him, then grins up at me while she grabs the previously forgotten bottle of lube, her gaze switching between my face and crotch. Jazz is obviously trying to do a good job but his rhythm is off and the haphazard scraping of his teeth about nullifies the positive psychological effect of watching him try to suck me off.

When I feel my hard-on lessening, I decide to add a few comments myself.

He is eager enough to respond to my murmured suggestions, including just stopping for a bit so I can guide his head with my hand. I'm so fascinated by the sight of my cock disappearing between his lips that I wonder what makes him stop a minute later, but a quick glance down his back reveals that Bella indeed has found herself something else to play with.

"Do you like having my finger up your ass?" she coos at Jazz from where she's sitting on the edge of the coffee table again, her right arm propping herself up on him while she keeps sliding her left middle finger inside him with slow, gentle motions. Jazz hums approvingly, which in turn makes me groan with pleasure again, leading to another delighted laugh from Bella.

"Do you like it just as much as sucking on his cock? Just think about how it will feel when eventually he's not only fucking your mouth, but your ass, too."

He lets out a muffled gasp when she stops, but it's only to squirt a generous amount of lube onto her palm to dip two fingers in it, resuming fucking his ass with them, just as she picks up stroking his dick with the remainder of the clear liquid coating her hand. Watching her work him over like that has me all wound up, enough so to ignore that he's still not really doing the best job sucking me off. Before long I can't stay passive anymore and shift a bit so that I can actively thrust up into his mouth, and from the way he keeps moaning he likes me taking charge of him, surprisingly so.

Jazz still comes about a minute before I do, either because Bella does a better job than he himself, or I'm more used to holding back. I let go of his head just before I climax so he can move away, but he doesn't, letting me come in his mouth. Bella, just finishing wiping her fingers clean on some antibacterial wipes, grabs his head in turn and kisses him deeply, making the whole exchange of body fluids even hotter.

Seemingly exhausted by his efforts Jazz withdraws a little, and I decide that Bella has been a tease long enough. Moving forward the moment he pulls back I push her shoulders down so that she ends up

lying on the coffee table, grinning up at me as she licks her lips pointedly. I chuckle darkly as I part her thighs with a decisive motion, making her wriggle her ass a bit as she draws her spread knees towards her chest.

She's so wet that two of my fingers slide into her easily, and before she can protest about me teasing her like that I add a third, receiving an appreciative moan from her in turn. When I look from her flushed face to where Jazz has halted, crouching next to her on the floor, I chuckle again, using my other hand to gently stroke over Bella's swollen, pierced labia, my thumb finding her clit.

She's still laughing at his dumbfounded expression when she snatches the bottle of lube up from the floor, then brings two of her coated fingers to her anus as she reaches around one of her bent legs. Feeling first one, then both of her fingers inside her as I keep fucking her with mine is making my cock grow hard slowly again; an effect that is greatly improved when Jazz overcomes his shock and goes back to kissing her, one of his hands massaging her tits.

Soon Bella is writhing and moaning under our joined ministrations, but I let her set the pace, mostly because I really love her pleasuring herself like that. I can feel her pussy walls already gripping my fingers hard when she suddenly stops, her free hand on my wrist making me halt.

"Don't want to come just yet," she pants as she pushes Jazz away, only to reach for his dick. "I want to come with your cock down my throat."

He complies with a breathy laugh, getting up so that she can reach his dick with her mouth. Only he doesn't wait for her to start sucking, but grabs her hair almost roughly and resumes a leisurely pace of fucking her mouth. I'm surprised at his forcefulness for a moment, and the quizzical look on his face tells me that he's not sure about it himself, but Bella's eager participation soon does away with his doubt. When I feel her fingers start to move up her ass again I do the same with mine in her pussy, but refrain from teasing her clit. I know she can come from penetration alone easily enough, and as she seems to want to hold back a while longer, I won't push her – yet. That resolution about lasts a minute or two, then my own need is getting too overwhelming.

Watching her writhe between us makes it hard for me to hold back any longer, so I withdraw my fingers from her cunt. She makes as if to turn her head to look at me but Jazz keeps her from that, and a few moments later her loud groan signals that she definitely approves of getting my cock instead. Feeling her fingers like that creates a whole different kind of lusty feedback for me, and suddenly I can't get her coming soon enough.

Gripping her ankles for leverage I start fucking her, hard and fast enough to shove her body along with the motion. She cries out in response, the sound still muffled by the cock in her mouth, and I feel her whole body grow tense with her impending release almost immediately. The temptation is there to stop and keep her from climaxing for a while longer, but I'm too wound up for that myself, and instead enjoy watching her come between us.

Gasping for air Bella finally pulls away from Jazz once she's calming down again, but I'm of no mind to give her any time to recuperate. Letting go of her ankles I slide my hands down her legs, then grab her around the waist to pull her up and back with me so that we end up on the couch with her

straddling me, my cock still inside of her. Still trying to regain her senses after her orgasm, she sags against my chest, and I use that as an excuse to further shift her around on my lap so that I can freely slam my cock up into her. The moment I start fucking her again her breathless pants turn to near animalistic grunts, her fingers digging into my upper arms to find purchase. Grabbing her ass to keep her where I need her to be I keep going like that for a few more thrusts, then stop, stealing her breath away with my tongue invading her mouth. I keep kneading her ass roughly as our kiss turns to something more resembling sucking and biting, but when she tries to move her hips, I force her to keep still a little longer.

Taking the obvious hint Jazz joins us again then. With Bella all over me I can't see him, but I feel his knee bump against mine, then his fingers pushing into her through the thin wall of her pussy. Bella's residual moaning rises in pitch, and I think I feel her come again when he finally grips her shoulder to steady himself and eases his cock into her ass.

The sensation is divine, and more than I can take and still remain passive.

He's still waiting for her to get used to being so filled like that when I pull her closer to me with my arms slung around her lower back, and pick up fucking her again. Even held down like that the motion rocks her so hard that our mouths lose contact, but hearing her pant and moan into my ear is even better than ravaging her mouth.

With Bella's head now resting on my shoulder I can finally catch a glimpse at Jazz behind her sweaty waves of hair all over my face, and seeing the look of restrained bliss there only fuels my own need. He still hasn't moved inside of her but I can feel his cock with each of my thrusts, and I know that so does he.

Slowing down a little I keep watching him, feeling myself grin when he finally opens his eyes and looks at me. At a raise of his brow I force myself to grow still entirely, the rapid rise and fall of Bella's chest against mine the only motion for a second or two. He shifts his own hold on her, now no longer gripping her shoulder but her hips, and sets a slow pace as he withdraws almost completely, then pushes back into her ass as far as possible. Bella rewards this with a long drawn moan that sounds nearly like a purr, and after a little shift I feel her nibble on the muscles between my neck and shoulder. Her tingling love bites add to the maelstrom of sensations assaulting my body, and for a while I'm very happy to just relish them all.

Yet like before I can stay passive only for so long, the increasing urgency in Jazz's thrusts resonating with my own. I find his gaze again and at his nod let go of Bella, then push her up into a more sitting position. Pulling her closer against him with a strong arm around her middle Jazz keeps her there, then brings his other hand to her cunt, starting to rub her clit. My hands now free I reach up and grab her tits, loving the feel of them bouncing with every motion slamming into her body. Bella's previously closed eyes fly open when I switch to pinching her nipples hard, but while her pained gasp nearly makes me change tactics, the fact that she almost immediately comes again underlines that I should just keep going. Which I, of course, do.

Her climax seems to go on forever, furthered by us both fucking her at the same time now, and before long I can't hold back anymore myself. With a few last, hard thrusts I reach my own orgasm, then let

the erratic bucking of her hips draw out my own pleasure. Jazz follows suit with a loud shout, his face buried in Bella's neck, and once he's done we all collapse into a sweating, heaving, satisfied tangle of limbs.

Surprisingly enough Bella is the first to recover, although still locked between us she can't do more than squirm. When that gets her a playful slap on her ass from Jazz she underlines a low moan with a laugh.

"Shit, I can't tell you how good that feels."

"I think that's pretty obvious," Jazz retorts, then makes as if to pull away, but I stop him with my foot pushing down on the back of his thigh. While not exactly in a comfortable position I'm disinclined to move and let us disentangle ourselves. It seems as if I'm not alone with that as he doesn't try again, but after a little rearranging leans closer to me to capture my lips in a slow, gentle kiss.

It feels different than before, maybe because now the raging need in all of us is sated for the moment, but I won't even begin to deny that I like it.

Freeing my hand from where it got trapped underneath either him or Bella –

I really can't tell who – I bring it up to the back of his neck, pulling him just a little closer so that I can deepen the kiss as I push my tongue deeper into his mouth.

I'm a little reluctant to part when he finally draws back, and immediately feel bad about it until I find Bella smiling at me. Her eyes are still bright and her cheeks flushed from the exertion, but there's not even a trace of jealousy in her gaze, nor in the way she snuggles closer to me. I place a gentle kiss on her forehead, then keep nudging her with my nose until she turns her face up, letting me languidly rub my tongue against hers.

Once our cocks have grown soft enough to slip out of her Bella shifts to untangle her legs, then keeps pushing at both me and Jazz until she's free, staggering to her feet a little unsteadily. She's in dear need of a shower, sweat plastered hair sticking to her face and torso, and all kinds of fluids wetting her ass and legs, but there's not a thread of self-consciousness to her as she looks down at where Jazz and I are still reluctant to move.

"Who wants to join me in the shower? First one to offer to wash my back gets a blowjob!"

Neither of us reacts, probably because it's too much fun watching her turn a veritable glare on us, her hands pushed into her hips just over where faint red marks start turning into light bruises. I feel a little like high-fiving Jazz for us doing a good job there.

"Okay, let me rephrase that. Get off my couch this very second!"

Jazz laughs while I try to hide a grin, and he turns back to her after looking at me briefly.

"Your couch?"

"Yes, my couch. I searched for it for months, then fought over it with a scary woman with a mustache and a crazy Texan accent. And as much as I'm still pissed that I never got to burn the last couch in a vengeful yet cathartic ritual, I really love this one and intend to keep it. I don't even want to start thinking about what kind of gunk is soaking deeper and deeper into the leather with every second that you keep lounging on it. Off, now!"

Opting to be the wise man for once I set to obeying her order with a grunt, then haul Jazz up with me when he still seems bent on angering Bella further. As one-sided as our relationship might seem on the outside, it's a carefully plotted balance, and I'm frankly too scared of the repercussions of Bella getting angry at me for being deliberately stupid.

Clearly happy with herself for having won that fight Bella turns around and stalks off towards the stairs, and as there's no sense in remaining behind, I quickly follow her, Jazz on my heels.

In the past showering together has often turned into just another round of horny fucking, but it becomes obvious that tonight neither of us is up for that. There's still a lot of sloppy kissing and groping involved, but before long we end up in bed. Jazz hesitates a little as if he's unsure of whether he should join us, but Bella is having none of that, tugging on his arm until he's spooning her back, while she's half lying on my arm and chest. Sighing contently she then closes her eyes, a happy smile still on her face, and her breathing evens out almost immediately.

"Are you seriously going to sleep now?" Jazz huffs on her other side, but Bella doesn't even crack one eye open, let alone roll over to look at him.

"Sure, any objections? Your cock doesn't really feel ready for anything else, the way it's snuggled all soft and cozy against my ass."

"I can't believe you just said that!" he huffs, making as if to push himself up into a sitting position, but when all he gets in return is a chuckle from me, he quiets down again.

"She's usually out cold in a minute, you better get used to that fast. In fact, it would concern me a lot more if she weren't."

"So nice of you to talk like that about me when I'm right here, about to drool onto your chest," she murmurs, but her voice is already getting thick with sleep. Stroking her side gently underneath the blanket I watch her drift off, not perturbed when Jazz rearranges himself to get a little more comfortable. Cold as she usually is, having two hot bodies to keep her warm at night seems to suit Bella just fine.

While I don't fall asleep as fast as she does, a few minutes later it's hard for me to keep my eyes open. I'm mentally and physically exhausted, and the fact that I feel like an enormous weight has been lifted from my chest only lets me drift off faster. I still force myself to open my eyes one last time before I'm out cold to check on Jazz. He looks content enough, but not quite as relaxed as I feel; then again it's only understandable that there's more in his head still plaguing him than there is in mine. He still grins at me faintly when he catches me watching, and I decide that tomorrow is a better day to start worrying if this can ever work out the way we all seem to want.

Chapter 27

I wake up in the dark, a few hours after I've fallen asleep. Outside the sky is still black, but it feels closer to dawn than midnight. When I turn my head to the left I find Bella still soundly asleep, wrapped in almost every scrap of duvet available, but the far side of the bed is empty. For a moment I wonder if Jazz simply got cold feet and ran, but then I remember that most times during the last few weeks when I got home at crazy hours in the night I've found him awake, insomnia keeping him bound to zapping through late night tv shows.

When trying to go back to sleep fails I get up instead, moving slowly and as silently as possible as I dress, trying not to wake Bella. My assumption about Jasper's whereabouts are verified when I step into the short hallway at the top of the stairs, finding the room below illumined by the flickering lights from the tv.

On my way down I pick up several pieces of clothing that none of us has cared to carry into the hamper yet – I have to retrieve Bella's tank top from one of the overhead lights by jumping up and down two times – and of course my entry doesn't go unnoticed. Jazz looks up from where he has been frowning at a re-run of some 70s cop show, the bad lighting making it impossible for me to read the look on his face.

"Can't sleep?" I prompt unnecessarily, getting a shrug in return.

"Not really. Figured I'd better go before I wake either of you up with my tossing and turning. Seems to have been only moderately successful.

Sorry."

"Don't worry, I rarely sleep for more than five consecutive hours. Working at the hospital has seriously screwed up my circadian rhythm."

He nods, then turns back to the tv, but after a few seconds grabs the remote and shuts it off. Standing there in silence in the dark feels a little awkward so I turn on the reading lamp at the end of the couch, the low, gentle light casting more shadows than lighting the room properly.

When Jazz makes no move to get up I sit down on the other side of the couch from him, still feeling a tad awkward for a moment, but that passes quickly. He snorts softly and shakes his head as if to rid himself of a similar feeling, and I relax a little more. We share a grin and the residual tension is gone, leaving us both feeling more comfortable around each other than we've been in a long, long time.

"There's no easy way to ask this, so in the spirit of being blunt, just how pissed at me are you still?" he breaks the silence eventually. Looking at me with a guilty smile that's part real regret and part his usual charming self, he goes on when I just quirk one eyebrow. "I'm not beyond groveling, you know, but I'd really like to know where we stand. I don't want to come off as a jerk by seeming like I don't give a shit, nor do I want to drag everything into forced niceties territory. Just give me a hint about where in that spectrum I should be right now."

I give that some thought, mostly to humor him, before I can't hold a chuckle back in. He looks irritated at first but then joins in, shaking his head.

"Man, I know just how soap opera that sounds! But seriously, what shall I do?"

"Just be yourself," I reply sagely, then snort and go back on that. "Just your non-deceiving, not too much of an asshole kind of self. And no grand gestures, those really never work out."

He nods, agreeing with me, before he turns the motion into a shrug.

"Well, you asking Bella if she'd marry you kind of did work out for you."

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"Last time I checked we're not engaged anymore, whatever the fuck that even means, so I'm sure there are a lot of women between ages five to a hundred who would disagree with you."

"You're still together, madly in love, apparently both secure enough in your relationship to fuck the same guy, and in Bella's case, abuse me as a bed warmer, to me that sounds a long way towards 'working out', if you ask me."

"True," I admit, then snicker at his way of summing things up. "It's just words anyway. For us. But I really mean it when I say, just be yourself."

"We've seen you at your best and worst plenty of times and still find it in ourselves to like you, so just don't deliberately fuck up and we'll be good."

"That easy, huh?"

"Or that hard. Depends on how you see it."

Jazz looks down at his hands then as if to avoid my gaze for a while.

"I know I've said it before, but I'm really sorry for what I did. And I'm insanely grateful that you're both willing to give me that chance to make it up to you and earn your trust back."

"That's what friends are for."

My answer is a deliberate choice of words, and I gauge his reaction carefully, but he doesn't even bat an eyelash. I'm glad that so far what he's said all seems to have been the truth, although my ego may not agree with that a hundred percent. Moving on before I can feel stupid I steer the topic to safer waters.

"Anyway, so I take it you have no regrets about what we did?"

"Not really, no," he admits, then chuckles as if he is laughing at himself.

"Except for me feeling as if I've stumbled from one thing to the next. Guess that showed?"

"Kinda," I scoff good naturedly, but try to take the sting out of it with a grin.

"But that's part of the fun, at least for me. I don't think Bella has any protests, either. She obviously felt a lot more at ease with you not treating her with kid gloves that much."

He sends me a quizzical looks, then laughs again.

"It's kind of creepy how much you notice during sex, you know that?"

I take that as a compliment.

"Practice. Couldn't do what I like to do if I can't keep enough brain power to catch on to something as obvious as you trying not to appear like it still bothers you a little when you grab her hair and shove your cock down her throat, while she's moaning like she's inwardly high-fiving herself."

He nods at that, but a hint of doubt is plain on his face.

"Makes sense. Although it's kind of intimidating. Having to be that in control of myself and everything, really, as a dominant. I mean, you've told me that a hundred times but it's never really gotten through to me before."

"It makes a difference to just know on the one hand, and picture yourself in the situation," I retort, then can't keep from laughing with a hint of derision.

"Sorry, but it's kind of funny for me to see you squirm about something you looked down at me for just a short while ago."

Jazz has the grace to look a little appalled, but he doesn't protest. Instead he inclines his head, then scratches his chin.

"Speaking of that, my previous thick-headedness aside, would you be willing to show me a few things?"

"As Bella so correctly said, I'd love to. In the end it will be easier this way anyway."

"What do you mean?"

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words to explain.

"Things have become more fluent between us of late. It would be hard for her and me both to go back to keeping sex and play separate again now.

I'm not sure we could even do it, and I don't think either of us would even want to try. Including you as a more active part into that balance will be easier than having to always keep track of your reactions."

He nods, not quite able to hide his excitement, but then his enthusiasm falters a little.

"Being a little rough with her is one thing, but I don't know just how far I feel comfortable going with her. I know that I can't really hurt her without freaking out, and I'm not sure I can even watch you making her cry or something like that."

At least he's honest, although his words still make him seem like a hypocrite to me.

"You know I would never do anything to her that she doesn't want?"

"That's not the point," he hurries to explain. "It's not about her, it's about me. In my mind the need to protect her is too ingrained for that. And I'm not saying I'm going to get between you two if you decide to do something like that, just that I don't want to be a part of it. What Bella said last night really made me think. About me just walking out, you know?"

"Okay. I'm sure we'll find a way to make that work."

I have to admit, part of me is glad about his admission, and my selfish side definitely approves of not even having to voice my need to sometimes be alone with her. I don't know if it will still be the case, but in the past Bella has always behaved differently when he has been around, and in the playroom I can't have her second-guessing her own reactions. It's my job to make sure she doesn't have to, after all.

For once an amicable kind of silence settled between us, and it takes a little while for Jazz to pick up the thread again.

"You know, if neither of us had ever left home to go to college, I think chances would have been good that Bella and I would have ended up together. I still don't think I could ever be 'in love' with her, but we've been close for so long, there are worse matches made that hold for a lifetime."

His words grate a little, but I know how he means them. It's an explanation, one he'd probably never voice anywhere she could hear, but it makes sense. The way he's looking at me shows that he knows how I must feel about that and he's clearly waiting for a reaction, but I hesitate until the primal caveman in me has managed to go back to where he belongs – my subconscious – before I answer.

"But you did go to college, and things changed."

"For the better, if you ask me. The thought of having Charlie for a father-in-law is scary." Then he stops, grimacing. "Which reminds me that eventually he'll find out that I'm screwing his little Bella girl, and I'm so not looking forward to that day."

"I don't think any of us is," I snort. "Then again just letting Bella blurt that out, then get in his face for even attempting to tell her how to live her life could be worth the years of glares we'll both get."

"Dude, you've never really been on the receiving end of her self-righteous rage! You have no idea how scary she can get!" he grunts, then shakes his head, laughing. "Okay, now I feel like a real moron. She really doesn't need me to take care of herself. Probably never did. Maybe I've always been the

one to need it?" he ends up musing. I hold my tongue although I silently agree.

When he remains lost in thought I get up to grab a glass of water, smiling when I catch him hiding a yawn on my return.

"You know, we can always go back to bed," I offer jokingly, but he just scoffs.

"Yeah, right. But I'm not tired."

"That yawn just said something entirely different. As do the dark circles under your eyes."

"Still doesn't mean that I could actually fall asleep. Although coming twice after weeks of not even being able to get myself off kind of helped." Jazz grins sheepishly at me, but before I can make a cheesy and probably stupid comment, he goes on. "So, how are we going to do this, you teaching me stuff? I still don't think I can really submit to you. Without faking I mean, and you're too observant for me to pull that off anyway. And before you scoff at me again, I still remember you telling me once that a good Dom spends his time on the receiving end of things before he ever picks up the whip."

The way he squirms is almost adorable, and for a moment I'm tempted to see if I could actually push him into giving that a try, but I'm not that ready to set myself up for failure.

"Being on the receiving end doesn't mean you have to submit to me."

The way his brows rise is nearly comical, but I do my best not to grin at him too brightly.

"And just how should that work then?"

"Well, for starters we don't have to play or act in role for you to try things.

We can keep chatting about the latest xbox games while I tie you up and suspend you head down, feet up from the ceiling of the playroom so you see for yourself just how much that position messes with your ability to think straight because of the blood rushing to your head, or just how much your own body weight can hurt you if you don't get the ties right. But submitting is a psychological thing, a mind game two people play; I only need you to bottom for me."

I let that sink in for a moment before I launch into my explanation.

"I know some people think it's only semantics, that whole spiel with submitting versus bottoming, dominating versus topping, and it's beyond me to draw clear lines, but there's a huge difference in the end for the people involved. It's basically what Bella meant when she said she could never see you as her Dom, but she's happy to act in a submissive manner towards you. And that's the most I would ever ask of you in that matter, to let me take control of you – physically only – for a limited amount of time.

How much you enjoy it, and how much your mind will let you slip into that role and add an additional psychological layer for you, I can't say."

He still looks less than convinced, so I decide to just show him.

"How about a more hands-on example?"

"Sure."

Trying hard not to grin I catch his gaze, then force myself to lose all the friendly playfulness that has been in the foreground of our conversation the whole time.

"Get up and strip."

Jazz looks a little perplexed but after a moment's hesitation he obeys, shedding his clothes without a word of protest. I'm amused to see that he's getting hard already, although the cool temperature of the room is obviously taking its toll, too. I remain seated, even lean back in a relaxed manner as I look up at him where he's standing naked before me, physically imposing but not in the least bit towering over me.

Tuning my voice to a more conversational timbre, I ask him the quintessential question.

"Why did you just do that?"

He blinks, then even looks a little pissed, but his uncertainty about my motives is so obvious.

"Uh, because you asked me to?"

"Sure, but was that your only driving force? I mean, what made you get up and strip?"

"I guess I wanted to fulfill your expectation? You get kind of compelling when you switch over into Dom mode like that."

I snort, but don't comment on that.

"But no other reason? Not to please me or some crap like that?"

I chose my words carefully to make it easier for him to catch on, and of course he does then.

"Nope. I mean, how should seeing me naked please you? I'm not that much of a narcissist to believe that the sight of my Greek God physique has that effect on anybody."

This time it's hard not to grin, but I somehow manage.

"Are you sure about that? Not about the effect part, I mean, about your action not pleasing me?"

"Call me daft, but I just don't see it."

Extending my arms onto the backrest of the couch, I shrug.

"Maybe. But you keep telling me that you don't want to submit to me, and still you jump and do exactly what I say. You obey, you willingly take a first step to give me control over you and your

actions, whether you do that actively knowing or not."

Again he's confused, but now in a different way.

"It can't be that easy."

Now I can't hold back that laugh anymore, but before he can get in my face for that, I make my tone turn stern again.

"Go over to the window, lean against it with your palms flat against the glass, legs spread. Then hold still."

It's funny to watch him snap to following my order, then shake his head just before he turns his back on me to look out into the night between where his hands rest. I get up slowly then and walk up to his back, in passing shutting the light off. Stopping behind him so that I'm close but not touching him I remain standing in silence, letting my eyes get accustomed to the darkness. A light shiver runs through him but he keeps still otherwise, not a muscle in his broad back twitching.

It takes surprising restraint from me not to let my hands run over the expanse of naked flesh and muscle. Not in a loving gesture, but simply to physically admire and explore, a testament of the fact that he's wrong if he really thinks that seeing him naked doesn't have an effect on me.

When I finally do touch him it is a very deliberate gesture, and one without gentleness. I manage not to accidentally stroke his abdomen as I reach around him and wrap my left hand around his cock, immediately squeezing a little to make the gesture appear even more deliberate. He's completely hard now, and I feel his hips buck forward instinctively before he stops himself, remembering my command.

I pump his cock once, the fact that my palm is as dry as his cock making the action not entirely comfortable for him, before I stop and squeeze again, a little harder this time.

"Any doubts now that I'm in control of you?"

He shakes his head without hesitating, and over the reflection I see him open his mouth in an automatic impulse to respond verbally. But there he stops, a hint of a lopsided grin coming to his face as he utters a simple,

"No."

I'm tempted to swat his ass for the deliberate insult, but if I can only establish my dominance with force and threats I'm not worthy of it in the first case. Instead of reprimanding him, I continue with my explanation.

"Both the top and bottom have expectations. The top's are easy to grasp –

all he's asking for is to be obeyed. The bottom, on the other hand, comes with a whole slew. He expects that his needs are met, the obvious as the hidden ones alike; he expects that the top knows just

what to ask of him, how far he's willing to go, he wants to be entertained, challenged, rewarded, and all of that without feeling like he was actually demanding anything in the first place. A true prissy princess, if you ask me."

I stress my words with another squeeze of my hand, only letting up when I hear him utter a soft grunt of discomfort. He's still just as hard as before, so I don't change my tactic.

"In turn, things are reversed when it comes to responsibility. The bottom only has one responsibility, and that is to communicate, both verbally and using more primitive means to convey how he's feeling and reacting to something. The top has to ensure the mental and physical safety of them both, has to gauge the bottom's reaction right so he only demands something that is within the limits of the bottom; he has to put the bottom's needs above his own, even if that means not getting any real physical satisfaction out of the situation, although that very rarely happens. He's expected to be in control, and also seem in control the whole time, and he should be able to pull all that off without appearing like he's indulging the bottom. He can't fail and he can't make mistakes because they affect them both and inadvertently damage and abuse the bottom's trust. He has to know what can go wrong to avoid it, and he has to be flexible enough not to let the bottom feel like he has failed when accidents happen or the bottom needs to use the safeword. You see, it only takes a little willingness to be a bottom, but a lot of work to be a top."

I let go of his cock then, but before he can get the wrong idea I hold my hand up to his chin.

"Spit."

He hesitates, and again it's a deliberate thing like with not using any kind of appellation.

"Trust me, you don't want me to do this with a dry hand," I offer, and I have to fight a grin at how fast he manages to hawk up some saliva. Adding some of my own I grab his cock again and begin stroking him, keeping my hold firm and my motions slow.

"You see, the bottom is always the selfish, demanding one, even if they act all docile and believe that lie themselves. Everything he does is just for his own good."

He at least has the grace to offer a somewhat chagrin smile, which I pointedly ignore. Bringing my other hand into the game now, too, I squeeze his ass cheek briefly before I rub my fingers down his crack. I stroke his anus a little, but even before he can tense in anticipation or apprehension I move on, instead taking his balls into my hand from behind. It doesn't take much pressure to put a noticeable strain on them, one he rewards with a groan, and I let go again to instead stroke his perineum, the region between his anus and sac. He definitely enjoys that, and it seems to get harder for him not to move in either direction of my ministrations.

"One thing you should be aware of, as a bottom, whatever you do has consequences. Every reaction – a moan, a flinch, voluntary or not sends a message, whether you want or not. Deliberate disobedience is usually the easiest to react to, as it's the most obvious you can do. It's also the one most easily dealt with by the top."

He chuckles, the sound conveying just enough guilt not to seem too insulting.

"What, are you going to punish me now for not calling you 'Sir' or something?"

"I should, shouldn't I?" I respond, then withdraw both of my hands at the same time, remaining motionless behind him, just out of reach. At first he keeps standing as he is, but soon he starts to fidget, until he turns his head in an attempt to look at me.

"Shouldn't you spank me or something then?"

"Why do you think I should do that?"

"Punishment, as you just said?" he ventures a guess. Indulging his ignorance I swat his ass briefly, hard enough to sting, but not enough to hurt. He lets out a soft moan, the sound quickly cutting off when I speak again. "Now tell me how that was punishment when you so obviously enjoy it."

He's silent for a while, longer than I expect him to, and when he answers he's sounding rather sober.

"It's stopping and ignoring me, right? Letting me stand here, feeling stupid with my cock still as hard as if you were stroking me without even doing anything, and my own stupidity the only thing keeping me from it. Point taken."

I reward his uncanny insight with a laugh right next to his ear, letting my breath tickle the side of his neck. He jumps, then grows still again, now waiting with a little more patience for me to go on.

When I finally wrap my fingers around his cock again he eagerly thrusts into my hand, and I quicken my pace to get him more excited fast.

"You see, everything involving BDSM is not a guessing game. Not all the rules and commands are always issued verbally, but they should be obvious to everyone involved. Once established, you stick to them, on both sides. As a top, when your bottom starts to act up you bring them back in line. As a bottom, you either obey or you take whatever your misstep, deliberate or not, brings you. There is no room for wanting more or less without letting the other know, the same as leniency doesn't really exist.

Both players know their place, and they need to show and prove that to the other.

"So when we play for real and you act like a brat, I will see that as a provocation. Any bottom will always try to see how far they can go and still get away with it, it's part of human nature, and it's a top's responsibility to show his boundaries clearly and also enforce them. I'm blessed with a sub who thinks it's her responsibility and prerogative to shove me openly or try to manipulate me secretly all the time, which only works because I think she gets off on being put in her place just as much as I do doing that. Don't take any pointers from her there, and don't ever let her get away with it if she tries it on you."

Speeding my hand up further I lean close enough to pick up the faint scent of him, but refrain from touching him anywhere else still. The way his muscles flex all over his body is fascinating and I feel

myself respond to him, forcing me to take a step back if I want to avoid pressing my hard cock against his ass. As used as I am to Bella's slight form by now the contrast is even more obvious, and I have to admit, I've missed the challenge of being in control of someone I can't just pick up and throw over my shoulder, or hold down easily with just the weight of my body.

Jazz is close to reaching his orgasm soon, and just when I'm wondering if he'll ask for permission to come or not, he utters a low "Please!"

"Please? Please what?"

"Please let me come?"

It's more a question now than before, and for neglecting to call me 'Sir'

again I leave him hanging for a few more minutes while I add more of a squeeze to my even pumping, but then relent.

"Come."

And he does, almost immediately, hot streams hitting his stomach and dribbling over my fingers. Locking his muscles Jazz remains standing still then, his loud breathing echoing through the room. With my cock so hard it would be easy to either ask him to repay the favor, or even better, use his mouth for that, but the spell is broken, reality crashing down around us.

When I let go of his cock and step away I see his shoulders shake once, and I can't say if it's exhaustion, or something else.

If it were Bella acting like that I would ask if she was alright, but I don't think Jazz will appreciate that. Even when I step away from him he doesn't move for several seconds, then avoids looking at me as he walks over to the sink to wash the gunk off his body. Grabbing his discarded shorts and t-shirt off the floor I hold them out to him when he finally returns. He accepts them mutely and dresses, the darkness of the room making it impossible to judge the look on his face.

"Feel like sleeping now? I'm sure Bella is already missing us."

I can't tell if his grimace is really a smile, or if I'm just paranoid myself, but he shakes his head after a moment.

"I don't think I can sleep. I'd just keep you awake, and not in the way you might want to be kept awake."

I nod but don't turn to go, feeling that there's still something left unsaid between us. He glances towards the sofa, then back to me as he heaves a sigh.

"I just miss her so much. I wish I didn't because now it makes me feel even worse, like I'm betraying you and Bella. I know it will get better eventually, but right now it just hurts."

His voice is so low that I have trouble understanding him, but his pain is so obvious that it's impossible to miss. I don't know what to do, particularly as I don't think that there is anything I really could do to help, but then follow my gut and hug him, a quick yet warm gesture. He leans into me for the moment it lasts, accepting the strength I offer, but not unhappy when I let go again.

"You know that we both have your back. And neither Bella nor I feel betrayed. I think I would be more concerned if you could just shake her off like that."

Jazz looks up at my words, then nods before he reaches for the remote.

"If you don't mind, I think I'll sleep here."

"Okay. Sure. But if you change your mind, you're welcome upstairs, too."

I leave him to continue his late night channel surfing then, taking the previously gathered clothes up with me. Bella is still soundly asleep just as I've left her, and after undressing I slide under the duvet beside her. I'm still horny although my hard-on has subsided a little, but that changes fast when I snuggle close to her. Immediately she moves into my arms, barely awake as she is, and I kiss her shoulder gently.

Trying to go to sleep now is impossible, but I don't want to wake her up to take care of the hard-on I have from jerking off Jazz. It doesn't feel right.

But the longer I lay there, softly rubbing my cock against her ass, the more I want her, *need her*, and eventually I give in.

Bella moans when she feels my fingers slide between her pussy lips, rubbing up and down until I feel wetness seeping from her pussy. My other hand is on her breast, kneading gently but insistently, and I continue to kiss her shoulder until she stretches languidly, then turns her face sleepily to me so that I can brush my lips against hers.

"What's with the booty call in the middle of the night? You can't really be horny still from last evening."

"Nope, horny all over again," I confess, then plunge my tongue deep into her mouth while I slide my fingers into her at the same time. Still sleepy but waking up fast now she arches her back into the cage of my arms, then laughs groggily when I pull my head away from hers again.

"Wet dream or something else?"

"Something else," I admit, sounding about as sheepish as I feel, making her laugh.

"What have you two been up to without me? I swear I'm going to throw a fit if you fucked him without me being there to watch. You know how much I want to watch."

The last bits of guilt dissipate at that, and I smile as I kiss her again slowly.

"Nope, we just talked while I jerked him off, against the window."

"Bastard," she purrs, then rolls over, in so doing dislodging my hands, but now she's free to kiss me herself with fervor, while her eager hand does the same thing I was doing to Jazz not long ago.

"I know, you would have loved to watch that, too."

"That of course, but I meant him. Letting you go without taking care of you first."

I would have laughed at her words but her teeth nibbling on my bottom lip keep me from that, so I thrust my hips into her grip more firmly.

"That just doesn't do," she huffs, and when she lets go of my dick without doing anything else I take the hint.

Pushing her over onto her stomach I pull myself up into a crouch over her, already pressing her shoulders into the pillow while I re-arrange her ass to my likings. Pumping my cock twice I align it with her pussy, then push inside, settling more firmly on her so that all she can really move is her hips. She moans into the pillow while I grab her wrists, then cross them over her head so that I can hold them in one of my hands, leaving the other free to prop myself up.

Before I can even start to fuck her she already jerks her hips back, impaling herself deeper on my cock, and that's all the incentive I need. Growling into her ear I draw back, then thrust into her, setting a fast pace as I slam into her, getting rewarded with small, muffled cries every time my crotch meets her ass. She's writhing under me so that I put my free hand between her shoulder blades to keep her down – and at least part of her body still – so she doesn't throw me off or dislodges my cock.

"Fuck. Me. Harder!" I hear her breathless pants, and I comply with fervor, grinning evilly when I feel her lose it a few seconds later. I still wait until she's done convulsing before I let go of her and flip her over, then push one of her knees to her chest and thrust back into her, continuing in missionary so I can ravage her mouth. Bella keeps panting and moaning with abandon, soon thrashing her head around when my fingers on her clit almost make her come a second time.

"Shit. I'm sorry

shouldn't have

forgot to ask

please

ah!" she

finally gives up to try to form a coherent sentence, pulling me closer with her thighs and arms wrapped around me. That way I have to stop masturbating her but losing myself in her heated, sloppy kisses is worth it, and when I finally come I keep holding her almost tenderly.

Stroking her sweat soaked hair out of her face I grin down at her, then kiss her one last time as I pull her arms from around me and keep them pressed into the mattress. When I rear back she looks up at me, trying hard to look apologetic but failing utterly because of her post orgasmic glow.

"Someone's in deep shit," I reprimand her jokingly, but then kiss her deeply before she can do more than send me one of those pleading, puppy dog looks. "But right now playing is the farthest thing from my mind, so if you will allow me, I'll just let it slide, this once."

"Huh, let me think about that for a minute, the choice is so tough. How about yeah, sure?" she laughs. That settled, I go on.

"Speaking about that, we're going to have to change things up in the playroom a little," I tell her, then lean in to kiss her between sentences. "I'm going to have to do a lot of explaining for Jazz to catch on to a few things, and he's going to need someone to practice on, too."

Bella keeps looking at me expectantly, anticipation so plain on her face that I just need to elaborate.

"It's going to be a lot of stop and go and repeats for you, and considering the only thing he knows how to do is fuck you and make you come, we won't be needing to practice that, right?"

"Right, Master," she offers, mockingly enough that she makes me laugh in turn.

"Good. Because I don't want to hear any whining from you that I won't let you come. You know I don't give a shit about how horny you are, but he does, and I expect you to convince him that you're very happy being left high and dry, or in your case, soaking wet but unsatisfied."

"Of course," she huffs, as if I'm insulting her a little by stressing that – and maybe I even am. I snort, then move back, laying down next to her.

"Now that that is settled, clean my cock, then you can go back to sleep."

She nods, then crawls over me to do just that, but the way she keeps gloating up at me makes me wonder if I shouldn't squeeze a hard spanking in somewhere there. She also doesn't stop once she has licked our combined juices from me but keeps sucking my cock, showing me that

'can' doesn't automatically mean 'must'. Getting the hint I grab her hair and fuck her mouth until I come again down her throat, maybe a bit more roughly than usual, making her choke a few times.

I still must have done something right as she comes back into my arms with a bright smile on her face, and I curl around her after slapping her ass hard once. She just grunts, then closes her eyes, still smiling. I'm out cold before long, satisfied and happy for the most part.

Chapter 28

The morning of Thanksgiving I wake up unusually late – probably due to our nightly exploits – and alone. I bide my time stretching and rubbing the grit out of my eyes before I take a piss and don boxers and a t-shirt in what feels a now supercilious attempt at modesty.

I find Bella and Jazz in the kitchen, one cooking, the other making a nuisance of himself. Unable to hide a grin I cross my arms over my chest and lean against a storage cabinet, just watching them for a minute or two as they bicker. From what I can glean from Bella's huffed and angry comments she's trying to prepare a casserole, but Jazz keeps stealing the ingredients, and neither shouting at him nor threatening him with kitchen utensils seems to help. The whole scene looks straight out of some slapstick comedy but is so essentially them that it's less cheesy but highly amusing. My badly suppressed laughter finally gives me away and they both turn in weirdly synchronized motions to look at me.

Walking over to them I enfold Bella in a quick embrace, kissing her in greeting. She molds herself against my body for a moment, but then pushes away to resume cooking. Looking up I meet Jazz's gaze, unsure of why he's giving me a slightly weird look.

"Do you want a good morning kiss, too?"

He snorts, then laughs, shaking his head.

"No offense, but I think I'll decline. Whatever this is between us, I don't really see us holding hands or playing kissy face."

I accept that with a nod, agreeing with him. Bella mutters something about childish morons under her breath, but when I turn to her she's pointedly ignoring me, so I go grab a cup of coffee instead of her. Jazz meanwhile resumes his previous occupation, causing Bella to squawk dismayed in return.

"Stop it! If you keep this up I won't have enough to finish the casserole or the cranberry relish!"

She tries to push him away from the kitchen island with her elbow, but when that doesn't work, she turns to me.

"Don't just stand around there, help me! Or do you want to explain to your mother why we have to show up empty handed?"

I grin at her as I shake my hand, but prefer to sip my coffee instead of intervening.

"Edward!"

Bella is glaring at me now, trying to hold the cranberries out of his reach, but Jazz still manages to snag some. She's attempting to twist around to punch him, or at least push him away, but he keeps her from it by stepping closer to her, pretty much holding her wedged between himself and the counter

with his body. Not realizing just what kind of effect her incessant squirming has on him she keeps trying to get away, at least until he grabs her hips and attacks her neck, his eager kissing causing her to both cry out and moan at the same time. As he has been counting on, his actions make her stop fighting him, and with a triumphant laugh he grabs another handful of cranberries, before he makes a quick retreat to my side.

Accepting half of his bounty with a laugh I grin at Bella, who needs a few more seconds to clear her head. Then she narrows her eyes and keeps glaring at both of us before she resumes chopping vegetables with a vengeance.

"Just so you know, you're not doing yourselves any favors by ganging up on me," she huffs, then turns her back on us to get a saucepan. Turning to Jazz I raise my brows in a silent question, and his enthusiastic grin is answer enough. Leaving my half empty cup of coffee on the far side of the kitchen I pad over the Bella, then hug her from behind while I gently nuzzle her neck. She relaxes into me instantly, then utters a low chuckle.

"Don't think you can pacify me that easily with gentle kisses, I'm not that gullible or forgiving."

"That wasn't even my intent," I growl into her ear before I grab her firmly and haul her over to the fridge, the next best hard surface I can press her against, her whole front flush with the aluminum front. She nearly headbutts me when she tries to rear away, but keeping her in place by leaning into her I use that as an excuse to pull her head farther back and to the side to expose her neck. Keeping my palm over her mouth to muffle any of the obscenities she seems to want to hurl in my face I bite down on the sensitive skin just below her ear, making her buck against me.

"You really think you can order me around?" I playfully sneer, then bite her again, hard enough to draw a pained gasp from her. Wedging my free hand between her lower stomach and the pane I spin us both around so that now she's facing the room while my back is pressed against the fridge, and she tries to fight me again, but only for a second.

Then Jazz steps up to her and extends both of his arms so that his palms are pressed against the fridge next to my head, effectively locking Bella in between us. He briefly grins at me before he stares into Bella's face, dark intensity heavy in his eyes.

"Yeah, keep squirming like that, you're getting my cock all hard that way."

Bella grows still for a moment, then seems to give up, relaxing against me.

She stops trying to pry my hand off her face and instead lets her arms drop to her sides almost docilely. Chuckling softly I push my hips into her ass, feeling my cock react to the stimulation, which in turn also draws a low moan from Jazz as the motion propagates well through Bella's body.

"You're such a little tease," I pick up from him, never stopping sliding my cock against her. "I think we need to teach you a lesson."

Bella squeals into my hand when Jazz unceremoniously yanks down her pants and underwear in one

go, then shoves up her shirt and bra, leaving most of her body exposed. As I have to shift my grip around her middle anyway to let him do that I switch hands, leaving her just enough time to cry out before my other palm is cutting off the sound for the most part again. Her will to fight renewed Bella keeps pushing at us, but to no avail.

She also doesn't stop when I stroke my free hand down her stomach, then cup her pussy, in one motion both rubbing against her clit and Jazz's cock.

I keep doing that for a while, relishing making them both moan. Jazz in the meanwhile is busy playing with Bella's tits, only causing her to squirm even more.

With my dick all hard against her ass I soon can't keep this up anymore, and Bella doesn't even pick up cursing us again when I let go of her face.

Letting go of her altogether I pull my own pants down, then push her far enough away from me so that I can move. Grabbing her thighs just above the knee from behind I heave her off the floor, forcing her legs apart in the same motion that makes her sag back against my shoulder. The scream that leaves her lips is most satisfying.

Bella thankfully has the sense to stop moving after her bare heel hits Jazz in the arm, and I sag back against the fridge, letting the hard surface help me support her like that. Jazz, ever helpful, steps in and helps me steady her, sliding her legs around until I have them hooked over my arms.

"What now?" he turns to me, grinning mischievously.

"Now you grab the lube from the coffee table, slick up my cock, and then you help me get it into her squirming little ass. I don't think I have to tell you what to do with your own after that."

He chuckles as he's already letting go of Bella to fetch the bottle still left out from the evening before. Bella turns her head so that her face is pressed against my throat, and I have to laugh again when I feel her teeth scraping over my skin.

She's not too heavy but I'm still glad when Jazz returns, having somehow lost his own clothes on the way. Squirting a liberal amount of lube into his right hand he steps closer to us again, and he smirks a little at my moan when his fingers close around my cock.

He's quick and efficient as he strokes me a few times, then adds still more lube and keeps going, while his eyes keep flitting between Bella's face and my own. I just love the sensation, both from the anticipation and the fact that he clearly knows more about how to pump a cock than suck it, but I can't really protest when he lets go of me in the end to add yet more lube to Bella's anus.

When he's satisfied with the prep work he grabs my cock again, and after a little squeezing guides it to where it belongs. I feel Bella tense a little when I enter her, but she pushes herself down fast enough to show us both that I'm not the only eager one here.

As time is somewhat of the essence with my strength not lasting forever Jazz doesn't dawdle, and a few moments later I feel his cock slide into her pussy. I groan both from that and the lessening of

strain when he slips his arms in next to mine to take some of her weight off me, the shift caused by that feeling even more delicious.

Neither of us needs a signal as we both start thrusting into her.

Coordinating our movements takes a little longer than usual but finally we find the right rhythm, me going in just as he withdraws, which works best for us as it keeps her body mostly level. Bella's urgent pants and huffs speak about the same language, and once she seems certain that we're done rearranging her between us, she reaches out with her arms and pulls both mine and Jazz's head closer to hers.

Eagerly latching on to her neck I tighten my grip on her even more, then slowly withdraw first one hand, then the other, to instead hold her firmly around her waist with my crossed arms over her stomach. As much as that might limit how much I can move, supporting her is more important now, and the strain of the position makes her tighter than usually anyway. Plus, Jazz is doing a good enough job fucking her hard enough for the both of us, the sensation of his cock rubbing against my own making me forget the pain that is starting in my arms, back and legs.

Bella screams every time he slams into her, her shouts soon rising in pitch and growing hoarse with need, spurring us both on more. Soon it all gets too much for Jazz and he comes with a loud cry, briefly sagging against Bella and forcing me to stop. She hasn't regained her senses enough to utter a coherent word yet when he withdraws his cock and pushes his fingers into her instead, using his shoulder against her torso to keep her steady.

"Holy! Fucking! Shit! Please let me! Argh!" Bella cries out, each of her words accentuating Jazz's motions, and I'm a step away from climaxing myself when I bark a simple "Yes!" at her.

Coming together has seldom been such a rush.

Even after I put her back onto her own now shaky feet, Bella remains wedged between Jazz and me, happy to kiss every available mouth hungrily seeking hers, and I love coming down together like that, it's nearly as good as fucking her has been before.

That is, until the phone starts ringing, cutting right through our collective post-orgasmic haze.

It's not my cell so I'm instantly relieved that I'm not getting dragged to work right away, but there are not that many people who still call our landline. I'm also very indisposed of the idea of getting the call now, as are the others, not even Bella tries to squirm her way out of our now loose grasp.

Whoever is calling is insistent, and after the tenth ring, our answering machine picks up. I can't say I'm not a little bit weirded out by hearing my mother's voice just then.

"Bella, Edward, since you're not picking up the phone I presume you're either still sleeping, or otherwise occupied upstairs." She pauses then pointedly, but resumes in the same neutral tone. "I'm calling to inform you that I expect you to invite Jasper to the dinner today, if you've somehow forgotten to do so already." That stressed now. "I know that the three of you have been going through

some rough patches, but he's still your friend, and I'm obliging you to ask him. Rose and Emmett will be joining us, and Alice will be coming, too, so if he doesn't want to because of that, I understand, but I would still love to have him with us. I know his family lives several states away and I don't want him to spend today somewhere alone. And Edward? Don't steal all the cranberries, you know how much everyone loves Bella's relish."

She hangs up then and the answering machine shuts off with a beep, just as Jazz starts to laugh. Bella joins in a moment later, as do I, after a shouted "That wasn't me!" in the general direction of the living room.

Our sweaty sandwich disassembles then as we move away from each other to shower and dress again, although Bella only joins us after finishing her cooking alone first. I don't feel like it's necessary to extend the invitation to Jazz as he has heard it himself, but he doesn't comment on it until a few hours later when Bella disappears upstairs to get dressed for dinner.

"Do you think it's a good idea if I come with you?"

I'm so tempted to tell him that it's always a good idea if he comes with me, but now's not the time for jokes like that, and it's obvious how uncomfortable he is already. Purging my brain of lewd comments I shrug, trying to be honest.

"You have to decide yourself. She's there, and there's no way you're going to avoid her, but I'm sure that my mom will do her best not to let conversations die. If nothing else, she'll tell her stupid anecdotes of when I was a child, and you always laughed at them in the past."

"Yeah, you smearing cranberry sauce all over the new beige carpet when you were five is just too good not to laugh at it. Besides, she'll probably be occupied cooing over the kid anyway." He doesn't sound too convincing then, and when he looks up at me, there's a different kind of uncertainty on his face. "But what I also meant was showing up with you and Bella at the same time. The three of us together, and not gloating or fighting. It kind of does send a message, and no one can accuse either of us of being very subtle and able to hide anything."

"Do we have anything to hide?"

I wish I didn't feel a pang of hurt inside as I say that but at least my voice is steady and as inconspicuous as it gets, and Jazz doesn't seem to pick up on it. Instead he's scratching his head, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Maybe we just don't have anything to advertise?"

Of course he's right, but that doesn't change things.

"I think everyone except my parents knows that you're crashing on our couch, so it won't be that much of a surprise if we show up together. And you heard my mom, she'll probably tell everyone that she ordered Bella and me to drag you along, so I think we should be safe."

He's still not looking convinced, but then Bella calls for us to get dressed, which concludes our brief

discussion. I'm still lost in thoughts when I'm done shrugging into my clothes, but Bella's unnatural behavior finally draws my attention. She's still only in her black bra and panties, rifling through her stuff, haphazardly pulling things off a hanger and shoving them back after a moment's study. Just when I want to ask what's going on she pulls out a sleeveless black dress and turns to me, her brows furrowed.

"Would this make me look like a slut?"

Again I have to swallow the impulse to say the first thing that comes to my mind – which in this case is a tie between me informing her that I'd love to bend her over and fuck her when she's wearing only that dress and stay-ups, and telling her that I don't mind as long as she's my slut – and immediately shake my head.

"No, of course not, it's very elegant and classy. But you'd be hopelessly overdressed."

I pointedly look down at my own gray shirt and dark blue jeans.

"I know!" she sighs, then goes back to finding something else. Jazz joins us a few minutes later, cautiously sticking his head into the bedroom to see why we're taking so long. He still doesn't know, and I wonder if he's disappointed not to have again walked in on us getting it on.

"Outfit troubles," I inform him, and he looks as puzzled as I feel.

"What's the fuss? It's just Thanksgiving dinner, I don't remember anyone ever dressing up for that."

I shrug, neglecting to mention that last year Bella wore a similar dress to the one that she just showed me, only in pale blue, and I would have loved to fuck her right on the dinner table in it. Sadly she had still been with Mike then, and the only thing blue I had come in contact with had been my balls.

Turning to us both now Bella holds up a sweater and cardigan combo that causes Jazz to snort derisively.

"How old are you, eighty?"

She sighs heavily, then keeps on searching. Jazz eyes me askance but I can only shrug, not knowing myself what this is all about. I also don't really remember anything of her wardrobe that isn't linked to my mental note of

"needs to be fucked in", so I'm keeping my tongue about suggestions.

Bella eventually gives up and just slips on some dark jeans and a purple blouse, although from the way that outfit accentuates her ass and tits my sentiments haven't really changed.

Bundled into a few more layers against the cold we finally make it to the car and into the light afternoon traffic. Jazz is banished to the backseat to watch the casserole, while Bella keeps the cranberry relish on her lap, as if to fend anyone off who might try to snag a taste. They both seem lost in their own thoughts so I busy myself with humming along to the songs on the radio in an attempt to

ignore my own rising anxiety.

I'm somewhat tempted to suggest we just keep on driving and avoid the whole possibility for disaster, when at the last traffic light before we reach my parents' house a familiar vehicle comes to a stop in the lane next to us.

Emmett grins at me from the driver's side, an unfamiliar place for him since Rose never gave up driving until she had the little bundle of joy currently sleeping in her mother's arms next to him. At her husband's antics Rose looks up, too, pursing her lips at what I guess is a frown on my face.

The light switches to green and Emmett, for once behaving as childish as Rose so often claims that he is, hits the gas to slip into my lane before us.

That way we arrive just after them, conveniently spilling all of us together onto the well-tended front steps.

There's the usual greeting, hugging and back slapping, before Rose and Bella both snark at us guys to get the heavy stuff from the cars instead of gossiping. When I pass by her Rose gives me a pointed look as if to silently ask what is going on, but I ignore her, deciding to play dumb instead.

Before I can reach the door it already opens, revealing my smiling mother.

Never minding that we're all carrying goods and babies, respectively, she kisses Bella and Rose, then hugs me warmly before she does the same with Jazz and Emmett without even hesitating for a second. Herding us before her she directs us to the kitchen, and after that I have the pleasure of barely receiving a nod from my father. His disapproval is still palpable and he doesn't even try to hide it – and all that before he could even have found out what new, or not so new, things I've been up to.

As accepting as my mother is, he has always felt like any of my actions reflect back on him badly, and being one of the youngest doctors in the history of our state doesn't do a thing to counteract the oh so obvious flaws adhering to me. His words, not mine, and for once I'm surprised how little I'm caring about his disapproving stare.

As always, since the fateful night my parents got to know a lot more than they ever wanted to about their son's private life this summer, Bella takes it upon herself to run interference, first hugging Carlisle, then plastering herself to my side so that there's nothing I can do except snake one arm around her waist and let her show everyone just how comfortable she is with me. Whether that's a conscious action or not I still don't know, and neither do I care. Only that today I feel a bit of an ass as that leaves Jazz standing on his own with happy couples all around him – the effect only getting ten times worse when suddenly Alice steps out of the dining room, holding hands with an unfamiliar guy.

Bella goes still as a statue at my side, and I allow myself a weary if silent sigh. She and Alice have never been the best of friends, and I can only guess what the things Jazz told us yesterday must have done to that fragile bond of female friendship. I myself don't blame Alice, and the addition of someone to this dinner who probably doesn't know about what went on between all of us this year actually makes me glad. It also makes me feel like a wuss, but not having this end in a disaster would

make for a better day.

There's a moment of awkward silence when every one of the newcomers is taxing Alice and her arm candy, and as this is still my home, even if I haven't lived here for years, I feel obliged to act a little more civil than I would otherwise do. Extending my hand towards him I offer him a smile.

"Hi, Edward, and this is Bella and Jazz."

I can't tell if Alice notices just how fluently I include Jazz, but she doesn't show it, only smiles back at me after we have completed the brief handshake. He's a bit older than us, maybe in his early thirties, and not what I would expect her to go for ever. He's handsome, but more in an academic geek kind of way than the obvious good looks she usually goes for, also dressed the part in conservative dress slacks and jacket, but thankfully no tie.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Nate," he introduces himself, his voice a little small with what I gather must be the usual apprehension of meeting his girlfriend's friends, including parents. His behavior towards Jazz is rather civil, surprising me a bit, and his face positively lights up when he turns to Bella. "We've met already, right? Yesterday, in the book store?"

And suddenly Bella's strange behavior makes a whole lot more sense.

She's still tense as hell as she clears her throat, then responds with her voice oddly strained.

"Yeah, right, yesterday. Did you find that book you were looking for, on, what was it, the propagation of European Medieval societal hierarchy into the American colonies?"

I follow their exchange with a near sick kind of glee on the inside, while I hope that my pleasant smile on the outside doesn't look like a shark ready to go for his helpless prey. I seem to be doing a good job except for the long look my mother bestows on me when Bella cuts their conversation short, and with a tense, "I need to talk to you," pulls me back towards the kitchen.

We're barely out of earshot of the others when she stops and turns to me, torn between apologetic cringing and half-hostile defiance.

"So you met Alice's new boyfriend yesterday, huh?" I ask succinctly as I lean closer to her, using my height to appear just a tad more intimidating than is probably called for. In turn Bella straightens and crosses her arms over her chest, the line of her jaw clearly defined as she gnashes her teeth.

"Yes, in fact I met Alice and Nate yesterday, just after my meeting with my editor, when I was already running late for my late lunch with Jazz. Bite me!"

We stare into each other's eyes for a few moments, but she's the first to look away, her cheeks coloring with a deep blush of discomfort. She starts fidgeting then, and when she makes as if to turn away from me I don't move, forcing her to either squeeze herself by me or stay where she is.

She stays, but when she looks at me again a certain amount of exasperation has replaced part of the defiance.

"Obviously I know about him, no big deal. But maybe now you can better understand why Jazz's rambled confession made me want to tear his head off, then drag you both into bed with me? She's so obviously over him, has discarded him like a dishrag, and I couldn't just ignore that all of a sudden there was no reason left why we shouldn't re-start what we had, if we wanted that. And before you ask, I didn't tell either of you asshats because I knew you'd just get your heads shoved even further up your asses if you knew. Don't even try to deny it!"

I let her stew for a while before I straighten, giving her a little more space.

"I'm not. But if I recall, you've had ample opportunity to tell me afterwards."

She huffs, but then sighs.

"Yes, I had, and I'm sorry I neglected to do so, but I was kind of hoping that she wouldn't bring him here. I know, I can get quite delusional when I get fucked thoroughly enough."

I reward that with a grin – not a nice one, but it is obvious that it had the desired effect on her, the way she holds her breath for a moment – then lean in with the intent of kissing her with a silent promise of providing her with more reason for further delusions later, but before I can finish the move I hear my mother clear her throat from the direction of the door.

"I swear to you, Edward, if this is about you throwing a hissy fit because of Alice's new boyfriend, I will spank you over my knee, whether you're too old for that or might like it too much for my own comfort notwithstanding."

That gets me moving away from Bella immediately, who answers my rueful smile with one of her own. Trying to look properly chastised I turn to my mother then, who is still gazing at us levelly.

"Why should I? He looks like a decent enough guy."

My mother's elegant brows rise, and her snort isn't exactly ladylike.

"Don't give me that crap. I hope it's not too much to ask of my grown-up son that he behaves like an adult?"

"Of course not," I grumble, then I feel like hitting myself for sounding like a petulant child. "Look, this isn't about Nate or Alice, and in fact we were just about to rejoin the merry band that's ready to descend on the dining room any moment now."

"If you say so," she replies, she turns around, switching effortlessly from stern mother to best hostess there is. "Oh, and as you're already in the kitchen, could you please bring four bottles of beer with you? Emmett and Nate already said they want one, and Jazz really looks like he could use one, too."

"And the forth one?"

"Why, for Bella of course! At least I figure she will drink some as since she broke up with Mike she stopped pretending she doesn't love to chuck down a Heineken as much as you guys? I know you

won't touch any, seeing as you're designated driver and due for work in the evening."

With that she leaves us to ourselves, and when I glance at Bella, she grins and stretches up onto her tip-toes to place a quick kiss on my chin.

"That would be really nice of you."

And just like that I'm left alone in the kitchen, with nothing else to do other than to fetch the booze or look even more stupid. I hurry to rejoin the others, not wanting to seem like I'm moping around when I'm really not.

Of course my mother's assessment has been correct – while I'm surprised that I really don't feel any resentment towards Nate, Jazz has a much harder time coping with meeting his successor so soon. He accepts his beer with a grateful smile when I hand him the bottle. Being the last to reach the table I'm forced to take the last remaining place, between Bella and Jazz. I'm pretty sure that my mother had intended for me to sit between her and Bella but sneaky as she is, my beloved has stealthily switched our seats, leaving me smack in the middle of everything. The other long side of the table is divided between Rose and Emmett on the one end closest to Jazz, and Alice and Nate on the other, with my father having the honors of occupying the head of the table.

At first conversation is a little awkward, but Emmett and Jazz soon enough start discussing the latest NHII results while Bella and Nate resume their talk about that book she mentioned earlier. It turns out Nate is a history professor at Columbia, and he seems only too happy to regale our merry group with some anecdotes from his studies when my mother prompts him to – better than the cranberries on the carpet tale anyway.

Slowly everyone is easing up, and once we dig into the food, things are as close to civil as can be expected. Rose keeps eyeing us speculatively but holds her tongue, and thankfully no one else drops any weird comments, either. When the conversation turns to the Revolutionary War, Jazz finally chimes in. I'm surprised how relaxed he seems, and allow myself to let my own guard down a little. Everyone is enjoying the food, and to mixed amounts the company also; in fact the only one glaring at anyone is my father in my general direction from time to time, and I can certainly live with that.

Things progress like that to coffee and pumpkin pie, when Alice suddenly speaks up, looking all ecstatic and ready to bounce in her chair as she grabs Nate's hand on her left, and Rose's on her right.

"We forgot to say what we're all thankful for! Come on, everybody, we need to do this or it's not a proper Thanksgiving!"

I have to bite down on my tongue to keep from groaning, but of course no one protests – keeping Alice from her perceived traditions is like stealing a small child's cotton candy. A bit grudgingly everyone clasps hands around the table then, only Emmett and Rose modifying the gesture where he's holding the baby with one arm, and Rose her little daughter's hand instead of her husband's.

"Let's start with our happy, young parents, I'm sure yours will be easy to guess!"

Rose still looks less than ecstatic, but then again she seems tired and strung out since she got here.

"Okay, how about this. I'm thankful for my husband remembering that he pledged he would be on diaper duty whenever he's home, even at 4am in the morning. And I'm thankful for my wonderful darling daughter letting me sleep for up to three hours in one go before she loudly demands me to demonstrate again why we're mammals. Anything else? Oh, right, I'm thankful for endless reruns of TV shows at night because otherwise I'd never get to catch up on them all in just under a month!"

Everyone except Alice and my father seems to find her answer hilarious, the same as with Emmett's when he keeps it short with a loud, "I'm thankful for not having to smell gherkins on Rose's breath 24/7 anymore!" Then they kiss, probably with a little too much tongue than most people would find appropriate, but I don't think either of them really cares.

Once Rose and Emmett are behaving like proper parents again silence falls for a moment as Jazz seems more than a little reluctant to pick up, but after a moment he opens his mouth nevertheless.

"I'm thankful for everyone I know being healthy, and that despite the abysmal economic situation right now having found somewhat of a semi-secure freelance job for the next months."

Bella gives a whoop at his words that Rose echoes with loud clapping, once again making me wonder why I'm always the last to hear of such things. Jazz nods his thanks to Rose, then grins at Bella, and with his eyes flickering to me for a second he adds, "And I'm thankful for my friends, above all else."

Before anyone can read too much into that, I pick right up from him.

"I'm thankful for Bella loving me and bearing with me even when I behave like a stubborn idiot, and she has to guide me with her oh so gentle words to see reason again."

The lovely woman in question snorts at that, then gives me a light kiss before she murmurs a low, "Smartass!" into my ear. I snort, then go on.

"And because it's so true, I'm also happy for having the best friends in the world."

Bella echoes my words, although she adds that she's ecstatic about the first book she did a collaboration on hitting the shelves soon, before she, too, adds the friends remark. When my mother doesn't offer her own thanksgiving comment right away Bella leans close to me and chuckles softly, then adds, for my ears only,

"And every time I wriggle my ass around on this abysmally uncomfortable chair I get reminded of how much fun it was to have your cock in my ass while Jazz was fucking my pussy this morning, and oh boy, I'm so very thankful for that, too."

I try hard to disguise my laugh with a snort but still catch a look from my mother that tells me plainly that while she has no way of knowing what exactly Bella just said that drew that reaction from me, she can take an accurate guess at the nature of our whispering. Yet there's only amused happiness on her face when she does it, before she turns to the table at large and offers her own thankfulness – that includes for a cask of 1996

Château Iléoville Barton Saint-Julien Bordeaux that she brought with her from last summer's visit to France.

Carlisle offers a rather dry line about things going well in the hospital, and Nate, trying to be gallant but without appearing as if he is insincerely polite offers thanks to the cooks of the dinner, and of course Esme's invitation.

Then it's Alice's turn at last. At first she clears her throat, then proceeds by making gooey eyes at Nate that make me pray inwardly that Bella will never turn to such saccharine moves, but from the way she keeps frowning I feel assured that unless she wants to tease me in the future I'm on the safe side.

"I'm thankful for so many things, like my newest clothing line being *the hit* in France and Italy, and of course everyone around me being healthy, but most of all I'm thankful, no, scratch that, amazingly grateful for having met Nate, because he's everything I've ever looked for in a man, and more than I could have asked for!"

Way to sucker-punch someone without even talking to them, and the somewhat awkward silence that follows her words shows that I'm not the only one feeling like that. Trying to rescue the situation, my mom then asks a seemingly harmless question.

"So, Nate, how did you and Alice meet?"

It's funny how everyone suddenly perks up, while trying to seem inconspicuous about it. The fact that Alice tenses a little is not lost on me, but considering the way she usually acquires her conquests, I expect that to be because the tale probably involves alcohol, which, considering their painful breakup, wouldn't be a surprise to me.

Only that what Nate relates, with an easy smile and not a care in the world of what his words cause, exceeds my expectations by far.

"Actually, we met in Paris. Cheesy, right?" he offers, then smiles at Alice as he takes her hand in his. "I was there for a guest lecture at the Sorbonne, and Alice for a fashion show, I think. Then we ran into each other again in New York, had dinner together, and when it happened a third time here in Seattle, it started feeling a little too much like it was meant to be. And, well, the rest is history!"

The silence meeting his words is palpable, and when Bella finally asks the question we're probably all burning to know the answer to, her voice is oddly hollow.

"How long ago was that? That you met in Seattle, I mean. I guess New York was in September?"

The week of her birthday party, if I remember correctly.

Nate obviously realizes that the mood on the table has suddenly changed, but the question is innocent enough, so he answers promptly.

"About four weeks ago, why do you ask?"

If things have been awkward before, now they are painful, and I'm not the only one who spares a quick glance in Jasper's direction. He's about the only one not avidly following Nate's words, the way he keeps looking at the half empty beer glass in his hand with his face absolutely devoid of emotion. I don't know how to react, stunned as I am by the implications, and feeling Bella go oddly still at my other side doesn't help my indecision.

My mother tries to jump into the gap then, offering a slightly strained, "Well, that does sound like fate," but her words do nothing to dissolve the tension.

But they seem to tear Jazz out of his stupor, for he drains his glass with a long gulp, then stands up, the sound of the chair scraping across the floor grating up my spine.

"If you will excuse me for a moment," he offers in a near soundless voice, then he is out of the room. Still torn with indecision I'm looking after him when Bella jumps to her feet, running after him as she calls his name, sympathy so heavy in her tone that it's impossible for anyone not to make the connection.

Nobody says anything for at least twenty seconds, when, probably picking up on the general mood in the room, the baby starts to cry. Rose laughs mirthlessly as she gathers her daughter in her arms and grabs a napkin, then gets up to feed the baby in the other room.

"Mona, you already have impeccable timing, why do I get the feeling you'll make sure that your mommy and daddy won't be able to get you a sister or brother unless we hand you over to someone else for a few hours each week?"

She's barely around the table when Alice gets up to follow her. Through the whole exchange she has been obviously uncomfortable, but while she seems all too ready to seize the opportunity to flee, she doesn't really look apologetic.

"Edward, will you help me clear the table?" my mother asks me, and I'm not sure if she does it to keep me occupied, or because she wants to squeeze the details out of me in the kitchen. Either way I nod, happy not to belong to the unhappy few left sitting at the table.

True enough, the moment I'm done putting the last dishes into the washer I find her looking at me, concern making her face appear years older than her birth certificate states.

"I might not know all the details, but I simply remember that Bella told me about their breakup two weeks ago?"

I just reply with a mute nod.

"And I presume she didn't sit on that information for a month already?"

"Nope."

She sighs then and rubs her eyes, before she turns a stern look at me.

"If you expect me to kick her out or something now, you're sorely mistaken

."

"Mom, stop it!" I exclaim, probably loud enough that the people across the street can hear me still. Taking a deep breath I tune my voice lower as I go on. "I'd never ask you to do something like that, and you know that. Can't hold it against you if you'd want me to, though, so you'd have an excuse.

But seriously, I don't really give a fuck about it."

I don't know who's more surprised about my outburst, me or her, and after opening and closing her mouth twice without making a sound she whips around and walks out. Scrunching my eyes shut I lean against the kitchen island until I hear the back door open and close, admitting Bella and Jazz back in. Bella just looks at me for a moment before she walks on into the dining room, leaving Jazz teetering between following her and coming over to me. I'm not surprised when he walks into the kitchen, and after a long, haunted look lets me hug him in silence.

The moment only lasts for a few seconds, as I step away from him quickly when a very distinct scent hits my nostrils.

"Jesus, have you been smoking pot?"

I only need to look at his blood-shot eyes, but he still nods in confirmation.

"On my parents' back porch?"

"Yeah, on their back porch, while Bella was giving me a blowjob no less."

I don't know whether to stare or laugh.

"She did that?"

"Actually, no, she only offered it in jest, but I think from the way sympathy was pouring out of her she would have done it if she had thought it would help any."

His laugh is real enough, thanks to the wonders of marijuana, but cuts off suddenly when his eyes fix on something behind me. Turning my head I find no other than Nate hovering just inside the doorway, looking something between nervous and apologetic. For a moment I feel like he has caught us doing something indecent but we weren't touching at that point, and there's no guile in his eyes, either.

"I'm terribly sorry if what I said caused you distress, this was never my intention, and I hope you accept my apology?"

I want to groan inside at his words – also because he doesn't even seem to know who he's apologizing to, Jazz or me – but before I can say something, Jazz replies with more maturity than I would have guessed him able to.

"It's not your fault, man, and no reason to apologize. Can't really be a great moment for you when you find yourself poking an anthill like that without even knowing that it's been there all along."

Nate has the grace not to answer, and after a moment Jazz nods, then walks by him to rejoin the others. I wait for him to say something else but when he doesn't, I shrug.

"If you haven't figured it out already, he's Alice's ex. And if you were wondering, they didn't break up four weeks ago."

With that I leave him there alone in the kitchen, wondering if this will be the last I've seen of him, or not. The mood inside the dining room hasn't changed much, Rose and Alice are still missing, and not quite surprising my mother has managed to procure a glass of Scotch for herself that she's sipping daintily. Sagging back onto my seat between Bella and Jazz I'm surprised to see Nate return so soon, but before the awkwardness can get any worse by itself, the girls enter the room. I'm not sure if that's an improvement.

Alice meets my gaze levelly as she takes her place again, but she doesn't seem apologetic in the least. I don't know why exactly that rubs me the wrong way – and it's not like there's a shortage of reasons, really – but I'm actually surprised that she doesn't even seem to feel any remorse at what she has caused. It seems that me looking at her is a silent challenge for her, because when no one else says anything, she takes a dainty sip from her by now cold coffee, looking from me to Bella, and lastly to Jazz.

"Okay, I get it, so there's a slight time discrepancy here that everyone is oh so scandalized about now, but can we see this topic as acknowledged and move on, please? This is getting a little tedious."

Bella on my right goes very still, assuming the kind of calm I've seen one too many times in my life. As long as she's raving mad and screams, Bella is a force to be reckoned with, but whatever is bothering her is easily resolved. But this calm is the exact same way she was acting when I got to stammer out my fleeting apologies last summer that ended with me proposing to her. And if I'm not completely mistaken, whatever she's readying herself to tell Alice is not something that should be uttered in present company, if ever.

I try to be stealthy as I slide a hand up her leg in a pacifying gesture, but of course she tenses up even more before she turns her head and glares at me, a clear warning to back down and let her handle this. I can see the frustration in her gaze, and that's mostly what keeps me from just leaning back and letting things unfold. Holding her gaze I do my best to tell her with my eyes to let it go. If she wants to, she can have my ass later at home, but I really don't want her involved in this cluster fuck.

It seems as if today is my lucky day as Bella finally exhales loudly and looks away, tension slowly leaving her posture as she mentally backs down. I'm just about to do the same, hoping to somehow get out of here before anything else can happen that might bring this powder keg to explode, but then Alice gives a small yet derisive laugh.

"And if he tells you to bark, you won't even ask how loud, right? It's sad to see women give up their independence like that, but your stunt with Mike should probably have been a dead giveaway that

you're prone to that."

My head whips around and for a few seconds I can only stare at Alice, dumbfounded. I half expect Bella to get in her face, but instead of letting her emotions rule, she only leans back further in her chair and regards the woman sitting across from her calmly.

"If he gave me a good reason for it, why not? There are worse things he could ask me to do, but I wonder, do any of them hold up to cheating?

Somehow I don't think so."

So much for keeping things civil, but I still admire Bella's calm, although towards the end some of her anger is leaking into her voice. Alice straightens at the jibe, then huffs as she spares a glance in my direction.

"At least I'm in good company, wouldn't you say? Then again, judging from your previous behavior all should be forgotten and forgiven in a week or two and we can go back to being besties. But oh, I'm not so sure I'd even want that, seeing as you're once again fucking my ex!"

Bella doesn't even blink, and keeping her cool clearly doesn't sit well with Alice. I know that I should hold my tongue, particularly as Bella seems to be doing fine on her own, but I just can't – too often she has been fighting my battles, and with this still being my home and Alice attacking the people I care about, I just can't sit there and let everything wash over me.

"Just when did you turn into such a hypocrite?"

Alice's head now snaps around so that she's glaring at me full on, but that doesn't faze me.

"Come on, Edward, shouldn't you of all people be careful to use that word?"

Slowly but surely, she's getting on my nerves.

"You mean because according to the drama you helped drag out last summer I'm a cheater, too? First of all, that's between me and Bella, and last I checked we've resolved that issue a long time ago. And second, wouldn't you say that there's a huge difference between a kiss and going behind someone else's back for weeks before dumping them and making them feel like it was all their fault?"

"Oh, like it should have come as such a surprise for anyone! What Jazz and I had for the last months was barely more than living in the same house, that's a very long stretch from anything that could resemble a relationship! You can't make me responsible for him being such a blind fool!"

I can only guess what Nate must be thinking of all this while he's following our info dump screaming match with a look on his face as if he had swallowed a live toad, but then again the only one seemingly amused by this is Rose. At least my mother hasn't gotten herself a refill yet, and I don't even bother to check how my father is reacting – the displeasure of having to witness how his son is once again openly admitting his frivolous lifestyle is coming off him in waves.

Jazz doesn't say anything to Alice's claim but I can see how much the words hurt him, and the implication that I'm no better than her when she doesn't seem to give a shit about the damage she's causing is what finally makes me snap. Coming to my feet I lean across the table, using every inch of my height to be physically imposing, as I try to stare Alice down.

"You know what, I'm done with hearing your excuses! Go on living in your dream world where you are perfect and everyone else is out to either get you or make your life miserable! But have you ever asked yourself why you can't keep anyone close to you for an extended amount of time? Or am I wrong that the longest you've ever had a relationship with anyone besides Jazz was numbered in weeks? That none of your friends from high school or college or your previous job even send you a birthday message on facebook? Have you ever considered that maybe, just maybe, it's not everyone else but you who's so fucked up that people don't want to deal with you any more?"

I hear my mother gasp from somewhere to my right but do my best to ignore her, instead turn away from the stone-faced mask Alice's features have turned into to Nate, offering him a wry grin and a snort.

"Good luck, buddy, trust me when I tell you that you'll be the next in a long, long line who knows better than to want to be anywhere near her. Unless it's your thing to hang out with a delusional, manipulative, frigid bitch who gets off on making everyone around her feel like shit."

I don't even get to gloat at her as the moment I fall silent my mother utters a truly scandalized, "Edward!" while my father gets up, nearly toppling over the chair behind him.

"I will not have this in my house! You will take your accusations back and apologize to Alice, or -"

"Or what?" I sneer, turning to face him now. "You'll kick me out? You'll disown me? Be my guest, I really don't want to be part of a family that backs liars and cheaters who are doing everything possible to ruin everyone else's life!"

The hate and disgust I see in his face is making my physically ill, but before I can say more, Bella is in front of me, pushing me bodily back from the table and keeping herself like a shield between me and pretty much everyone else. The look she sends me is pleading but her voice is still calm, almost neutral when she touches my arm.

"Come, let's go home."

No, "This is enough!" or, "Why do you even bother!", just those four simple words, but they sum up everything that needs to be said. I don't even say good-bye to anyone, just step around her and angle towards the front door, with her at my heels after she thanks my mother for the food – though pointedly not the company – and wishes everyone Happy Thanksgiving. I can't say if Jazz does the same or not, but I've barely shrugged into my jacket when they both join me at the front porch.

My anger is draining from me uncharacteristically fast, leaving me feeling hollow inside as I pivot the streets back to our condo. Neither of them speaks a single word on the whole way there but Bella keeps her hand on my thigh, a silent token of support that I appreciate more than I can say.

Once home Bella forgoes her usual offer of making coffee, and the three of us sink down on the sofa, misery personified with Bella in the middle of me and Jazz curled around her. My very soul seems to hurt when I realize that he's crying against her shoulder, but there's nothing I feel I can say or do to help, so I leave her to comfort him while I just stare at the ceiling.

"That went well," Bella finally breaks the silence after Jazz has gone quiet for a while, her tone dry yet full of desolation. At my grunt she turns her head and looks at me, then offers me a small smile. "No one called me a slut for once. You have to admit, that is some sort of improvement."

I really don't know what to respond, but I'm not happy when the door bells rings, effectively keeping me from finding a good come-back. I'm not yet done trying to ignore it when it goes off again, followed by a quick knock on the door.

"Shall I get that?" Bella offers, but I shake my head, extracting myself from her grudgingly.

I can feel both her and Jasper's gaze between my shoulder blades as I trudge over to the door, absentmindedly running my hand through my hair that is a hopeless case now that Bella has been running her fingers through it for a long while.

I'm not even that surprised when I open the door and find myself confronted with a slight figure, bearing a stack of microwave boxes in her arms.

"Edward, can we talk?"

Chapter 29

I feel my whole body tense with apprehension, but force my voice to remain civil as I answer with a question on my own.

"Why are you here, mom?"

She opens her mouth as if to offer one of her cutting, ironic answers, but then closes it again as she thinks better of that.

"I came here to talk to you, that's all. I also bring this meager offering of food, if that helps make me appear less threatening."

I feel like smiling despite the feeling of unease still gripping me, then nod.

"Sure, do you want to come in?"

"If you want me to, but why don't we take a walk in the park, like we used to when you were in kindergarten? I even brought some stale bread for the ducks," she adds with a gentle smile.

It's obvious that she's trying to pacify me – whether I need to be pacified or not – and before I can answer Bella slips in beside me, one arm slung across my lower back to keep herself anchored there beside me. She greets my mother with a sad but nevertheless nice smile, the gesture getting eerily mirrored, before my mom wordlessly hands the boxes to her.

"Guess I'll grab my coat then," I say once Bella has walked into the kitchen to store the food in the freezer. Glancing at the clock of the microwave I decide that I might as well walk to the hospital once we're done talking, seeing as I only have another hour until my shift starts.

Hugging Bella from behind I kiss her good-bye, then squeeze Jazz's shoulder on my way back to the door. When I join my mother outside I still can't shake the bad feeling off that she's going to scold me for acting like a total jackass any moment now, but when we have to wait for the elevator, she turns to me and frowns.

"I'm not here because of what you said before you stormed out, we don't even have to breach that subject at all. Living with your father for more than half of my life has made me accustomed to ignoring everything that could be even slightly uncomfortable. I'm here because I think that this talk is long overdue, and with what happened today, well, let's just say I feel the need to tell my son how proud I am of the man he has become."

The arriving elevator car keeps me from having to find an answer to that in my stunned state, and we both don't say a word for the short walk over to the park, but it's no longer the uncomfortable silence from before in the hallway. During the day it has become increasingly warmer, thawing the last bits of snow to gray slush. Not many people are outside under the overcast sky, leaving us to have our talk in comfortable privacy.

"Did you just say that to lull me into complacency, or do you really think that?"

She smiles at the question, but I don't have to explain what I mean.

"No, I really think that you've grown up a lot these past months. Not that you've been acting all that immaturely before, but since you and Bella are together you've changed a little, for the better I believe."

"Gee, now you're making me blush."

"I highly doubt that anything I could come up with will have that effect on you," she retorts, then angles towards one of the smaller paths leading to the duck pond.

"I'm sorry for how we've left. Guess that wasn't quite that mature."

She snorts as if to say, "You think?", but leaves it at that.

"As I said, we don't have to talk about that."

"Unlike my father I don't shy away from a topic just because it makes me uncomfortable. And I don't have anything to hide."

Acknowledging that with a nod, my mother doesn't hesitate long to put that claim to the test.

"So is it true that you and Bella have welcomed Jazz back, and not just as a friend who stays over on the couch until he finds a new place?"

"You mean if we've had sex again? Yes."

I keep my answer to the point, mostly because I have no idea how much about that she even wants to know, but my reply doesn't seem to surprise her.

"Before or after resolving your issues?"

The near playful lilt to her voice makes me grin, but I try to hide it.

"For the most part after."

"Well, good for you then."

I'm still a little wary of how well she's taking that, but she picks up on it before I can ask any further. Stopping at the side of the path she waits for me to join her, then turns to face me, her gentle eyes holding my gaze captive.

"I've never had any problems with you having an interest in men, with or without Bella involved. As far as I'm concerned, you can sleep and live with whoever you want to. The only thing that counts for me is that you're happy, Edward." She clucks her tongue when I try to speak up, and adds,

"Of course it was a little hard for me to process the news when I learned of it last summer, but I've had a lot of time to come to terms with it since then, and I've seen how unhappy you were for so long. It's good to see you more like your usual self again."

I don't know if I quite believe her, although I really want to, and my silence seems to speak volumes as she resumes talking quickly.

"I have to admit, there was a time when I wouldn't have been that surprised if you'd one Sunday turned up on our doorstep and introduced Jazz as your boyfriend."

"You thought I was gay?"

She shrugs.

"You should have heard yourself talk about him when you two met in your first week at college. Jazz this, Jazz that, all the things you'd done – it was hard not to take your enthusiasm at finally having a male best friend after spending years tagging after Alice as nothing more than that."

I wisely keep my tongue about what I remember never telling her, then I think about what she meant with what she just said. I have to admit, I've never quite been able to pinpoint the moment when my friendship with Jazz has become more than just that, but I know that back then it really has been just that.

As if she had read my mind, my mom shrugs.

"Anyway, I nearly forgot about that when you started talking twice as much about Bella, but in hindsight I think I haven't been all that wrong. Either way, I was glad that you were finding new friends on your own, and I have to admit, after the introverted way you were acting through most of high school I was just glad that you were finally connecting with people more easily."

"Introverted, eh? Have you ever dealt with the usual bunch of fifteen year olds? I never knew what to talk with any of them. Plus they didn't like me because I was too smart for them. And then they didn't like me because they all thought that Alice's friends were all over me, while they kept ignoring the other guys of the same grade."

She huffs, then gets a certain gleam in her eyes.

"Which reminds me, did Bella ever see the picture of when Alice and her friends dressed you up as a girl at her sixteenth birthday? You were so adorable! And pretty."

"Mom!"

"Ah, shut up, I'm sure neither Bella nor Jazz will ever dispute your masculinity. But it's good to know that I've found a new thing to blackmail you with, should I need it."

I don't comment on that, happy enough when she doesn't mention what else she could be using to force me to act all nice and docile, but instead return to the previous topic.

"Was it really that obvious? About Bella I mean." A little in afterthought I add, "and Jazz."

She shrugs, a light smile playing around the corners of her lips.

"I guess a mother of a different child wouldn't have noticed that much, but I've spent so many years worrying that you'd never find friends who you'd feel so comfortable with, who could be your intellectual equals and also share your interests and hobbies. Not that you were that much of an outcast, but at ever PTA meeting I saw anew that nearly none of the other parents knew you, and even the teachers didn't seem to have found any connection to you. I was always hoping that things would change in college, and I still stay by my conviction that as long as you're happy with your life, I am, too. Plus, you know that I've always liked Jazz a lot, and not just because of any speculations about what you two might be up to when you're not showing your best behavior under parental supervision."

It's a little scary to realize that my own mother has known all that for so long but never said a word, least of all anything to express any concern or displeasure. No wonder she's taking the recent changes in stride.

We're both fall silent for a little while, watching as a string of ducks crosses the pond, but as they don't see us offering them any food they just pass us by.

"You know that if you need someone to talk to, I'm always here for you?"

Also for topics that you might not want to discuss with your mother."

"Thank you, I appreciate that."

She nods, then regards me for a long time as if the more or less neutral look on my face would tell her all my secrets.

"Is there anything you would want to talk about right now?"

I shake my head, probably a little too fast, but she doesn't pry. That's one of the things I've always loved about her, that she never pushes, always waits patiently for people to come to her. And it's a tactic that has never failed to work, if I remember all the things I've confessed over the years under that gentle, patient gaze of hers.

Chewing on the inside of my cheek I try to find the right words, then just blurt out what keeps racketing inside my head for the past hour.

"I just don't understand how Alice could do this to us."

At first she shows no reaction, but when it becomes apparent that I'm disinclined to go on, she sighs.

"You know that I don't like to take sides. It's not my place, this is your problem, and you know that I see her like a surrogate daughter most of the time. But I have to admit that today it's hard for me not to be cross with her."

"Cross?"

"Edward, I'm a woman beyond the age where she still has numbers on her birthday cake, of course I'm 'cross', not fucking mad or something like that.

I leave the expletives to you, they suit your well versed speech much better than me. But age and emotional distance might lend me a somewhat different point of view here."

Sighing, I rub my eyes.

"I know that she's always had a penchant for drama, but today, that was simply -" I want to say fucked up, but then change my mind. "It wasn't like the Alice I've known since before I grew a beard. She was mean and calculating, hostile when no one even provoked her, and deliberately hurtful. I kind of get why she's mad at me, and while I think it's a very low blow I see why she'd want to flaunt Nate in front of Jazz, but what I don't understand is why she keeps attacking Bella. Bella never did anything to provoke her, and I'm still amazed that she didn't bite Alice's head off today."

"That's because Bella was about the only one who acted moderately mature today. Speaking of which, please tell them both that if they smoke pot on my back porch again I'll ask for a joint for compensation next time."

Her words make me snicker, and I accept the jibe with a nod.

"Will do. I didn't even know Jazz had any."

"Or you would have followed them outside?" she ventures a guess, then laughs at my pointed glare. "Oh, come on, I don't believe that you've never smoked any pot before. I've been in college, too, remember? Although that was in the late seventies, we probably smoked a lot of stuff you kids wouldn't touch anymore."

"I've been working in the ER long enough now to tell you that's wishful thinking."

"Be that as it may, I think you're missing the point about Alice," she resumes our previous conversation thread.

"Which is?"

"Now Bella not only has you, but also Jazz, leaving Alice with no one, as you so aptly summed up for her."

It's funny how even her neutral words can make me feel like an ass all over again, but I have to admit, I'm still not sorry about what I've said.

"You know that she kicked him out? And unless you count a very brief spell over the last few weeks, ending the day she and Jazz broke up, Alice has been closing herself off from me. It's not my fault that people around her have been turning their back on her."

"I didn't say it was, just that I think that she somehow feels like the three of you are banding together against her, which is why she felt the need to attack who she presumed to be the weakest of the three of you."

"How can she think that Bella is weak?" Now I'm really puzzled.

My mom shrugs, as she herself seems to have the same problem as I do with understanding the concept.

"You know that Alice is one of the people who likes to judge a book by its cover. To her, Bella is very likely still the nice, sometimes shy girl she met in college, and the only time she revised that view was when Bella tried to fit into the image Mike had of her. It took me a while to realize that the real Bella is very different from that, and it's mostly her good nature that leaves her seeming vulnerable and impressionable. I have no doubt that if push comes to shove, Bella will be the last to give in of the four of you."

Her words make me wonder just how much my mother knows about what has been going on between us – both between only Bella and me, and the two of us with Jazz. We've never really talked about it after the disastrous gala last summer, but I know that Bella and Esme have been spending a lot of time together, and without a doubt talking about us, too.

"So you think it's jealousy that makes her assume the martyr role? Because obviously, it's all our fault, and she's the one suffering the most."

"Now you're just being dense," she accuses me with a hint of laughter in her voice, but when she goes on, she's completely serious again. "If things were so simple you would have solved them months ago. And while I think I know her well, my view of her is biased, too. I won't even defend what she did and how she seems to approach things, but I still think that on some level, she simply feels left out. You should talk to her about that if you want to save your friendship, which I think you should, old and close friends are a rare commodity sometimes."

For a moment I just stare at her, wondering if she has gone off the deep end after all.

"How could I possibly talk to her right now? She wouldn't listen, and I'm not sure I even want to talk to her as it is!"

"Not now, but eventually. When the storm has blown over, you're not high up in the clouds about just how wonderful your own life is, she's had time to reassemble herself, and you can meet on neutral middle ground. You're not in kindergarten anymore, just because Jazz or Bella might not want to deal with her again, that doesn't mean you have to cut yourself off from her. It's only a matter of wanting to work things out."

The more immature side of me wants to stick out my tongue and deny that I will ever want this to happen, but I'm sensible enough to just answer with a long spell of silence. While I don't think she's right now, I know that my mother has a unique ability to see right through other people's bullshit, something I greatly envy her, and I'm not going to protest her point now and set myself up for

ridiculing later if she's right. There's something else that has been eating on me for much, much longer than the issue with Alice, and as she has more or less prodded the anthill already, I might as well go all the way.

"Does he hate me for who I am? When you said you were proud of the man I had become, it sounded like you were skipping over a 'contrary to what others might believe'."

A while it seems like she won't answer my question, probably as not to underline my conviction, but when she does, her voice sounds a little hollow with defeat.

"Edward, I won't lie to you, your father has problems with several of the decisions you have made in your life, and it pains me to see the two most important people for me so at odds with each other. But that doesn't mean he's right, or even has a point."

"That's not why I was asking. I just -" I have to stop there to keep my voice from skipping an octave with the sudden tightness in my chest, and it takes me a bit to breathe through it. "It's just that it's hard enough sometimes to live with the consequences of said choices without having my own father show his disapproval every moment possible."

"I know," she admits, then offers me another of those gentle smiles. "You know that I love your father, and we're a good match on so many fronts that I tend to ignore where our opinions diverge. If I didn't respect him for the person he is, he wouldn't be your father nor would I have stayed with him for all those years. His only fault, or at least the greatest, is that he goes through life seeing only black and white, while you and I, we're strong believers in the shades of gray philosophy."

As much as I want to agree with her – and I even do, just not in the conclusion she seems to offer – I have to speak up.

"I can see where he's disappointed in me throwing my budding career in Plastic Surgery into the wind on a whim, and because of the backlash my private issues have caused me at the time, but I'm more than happy that I did, because I think I'm much better suited to work in the ER and Intensive Care. I can also see why he thinks that my bisexuality is something he doesn't approve of, seeing as it's nothing he can put in a neat box that everyone will respect, but -"

"It's not that," she interrupts me, uncharacteristic enough for her that she stops my whining short.

"What then? Does he really have that much of a problem with the fact that I like to tie up my girlfriend and spank her?"

"If that was all you did I'm sure he would keep on ignoring it."

Her words don't really make sense to me, and when she sees that, she explains with a weary sigh.

"Your father is, for whatever unfathomable reason, blaming himself that somewhere, somehow he must have done something incredibly wrong for his son to have developed what he thinks is a pathological mental disorder."

"He what?"

"Before you jump to any conclusions, please let me explain."

"How can I jump to any conclusions when my own father thinks that I'm some sick -"

"Edward, I said let me explain!" she bites out, and her tone alone would have been enough to shut me up. We stare at each other for a few seconds, until I speak first.

"Sadomasochism is not a disease."

"Of course it isn't, but tell that to a man who thinks his medical degree comes with the guarantee that he knows it all?" she huffs, then turns her tone to a gentler cadence. "And before you bite my head off, too, he's not blaming you for it, but himself."

"That makes even less sense."

She gives a noncommittal grunt at that.

"I guess you'd have to be your father for that, but maybe I can explain what I think is going on in this usually very bright head of his. Unlike the two of you I haven't had to have my share of psychology classes, but I'm sure that my layman terms will let me explain, too. He's blaming himself because he thinks that something must have occurred in your childhood to lead to this, and he was never there for you to see nor save you from whatever happened. So now he's eaten up with guilt, but as he can barely manage to talk about the whole issue with me, I don't see how it's something the two of you could ever discuss, should you want to try."

"Not really." I've spent enough time thinking myself that I'm a sick weirdo, I don't need to relive that in a handful of uncomfortable conversations with my own father.

"Be that as it may, you know that your father doesn't want to deal with imperfection, and as you are a constant reminder to him of how he himself failed you, it's not that much of a stretch to guess why he keeps acting the way he does. And I don't mean this as an excuse, but as an explanation."

I still can't wrap my head around this, but when I open my mouth to say something, she forestalls me with a tscking noise.

"Don't tell me how screwed up that view is, I know. But your father has been difficult ever since you were born, and we've had more fights about what is best for you than I can count. For instance he saw it as a personal insult when I spoke up against letting you skip grades in Junior High already, and I still think that it was the right decision to let you have a real childhood instead of sending you to college with fifteen. I don't doubt that you could have managed the intellectual challenge well enough, but there's so much more to growing up than zooming through your scholarly pursuits.

Every time you didn't ace an exam he was ranting that I was holding you back, that I was falsely raising you to be mediocre at best when you could be nothing less than brilliant. And don't tell me you weren't aware of all that, you must have heard us arguing on more than one occasion. I still insist that

it was the right choice to let you have a life, and make your own decisions in time, while he will never stop blaming himself for whatever might happen. I don't know why he thinks he is such a failure as a father, but he does, and I don't think either of us has the power to change his mind."

Even though her words pacify me somewhat, they still leave me aching inside. Of course she is right, I've known for a long time that my parents disagree on virtually everything concerning me, and there was a time when I was convinced that was my fault, too. Still, as sound as her explanation is, it doesn't answer the central question.

"If he thinks it's his fault, why does he behave like I'm constantly letting him down?"

"Because he's a man stuck in midlife crisis ever since you left the house to live on campus, and as he seems to be too decent to bend his secretary over her office table to shake himself out of it I expect him to be stuck there until the merry laughter of a horde of grandchildren will let him assume the role of the wise, good-natured grandfather." She grins at the vision she herself must find equally ridiculous as I do, before she goes on. "Even though you probably don't want to see it, you and your father are so alike sometimes that I think a psychologist rather than geneticist would be the one to ascertain your relationship the fastest, if ever needed. The main difference I see is that somehow I managed to influence you enough to listen to reason through diligently nagging at you whenever I got enough time and opportunity. And before you protest, ask yourself what Bella would say on you blaming yourself for things entirely outside of your control or responsibility."

Like always she finds exactly the right thing to say to shut me up, and when I remain silent she pulls out the bread for the ducks and breaks off a piece for me.

"Here, have a cookie. I promise, when you finish eating it, you'll be feeling right as rain."

For a moment I just stare at her, then start laughing as I accept the bread, throwing bits of it at the rapidly returning ducks.

"Can a day get any weirder when your own mother is quoting 'Matrix'?"

"Don't look at me like that, young man, I'm a cool mom, I'm allowed to watch films like that and pretend I'm not laughing my ass off at how scandalized my son is that I could actually like them. Or does your own expectation of people accepting you as you are only go as far as yourself?"

And on second thought, don't answer that."

We both feed the ducks in silence, me lost in my own thoughts, her obviously satisfied that she caused that reaction in me. Too soon my time is up, and I accompany her back to her car, then even indulge her when she claims she feels the strong need to drop me off at the hospital like she used to, back when I was a little boy and wanted to see my father.

When I finally make it inside the ER I'm still amazed how once again she has managed to make everything right with the sheer force of her will, or at least push me into the right direction so that I can find my own way there. I am well aware of the fact that the road before me will be rocky and

hard – it was bad enough at times to manage uniting Bella's and my life into one unit of compromise, I'm sure that adding Jazz to that will end more than once in utter chaos – but the conviction that in the end it will be worth all the hassle and that we will manage is once again strong in me.

Chapter 30

As is usual for any type of family related holiday, we get lots of weird cases in the ER during my shift, and every time I get a chance to lie down I can barely catch a few minutes of sleep before the nurses wake me up again.

After the Thanksgiving dinner we had, I'm somewhat glad to see that other people don't really stick to the saccharine version of it that TV always portrays, either. I'm also not unhappy to leave Bella to comfort Jazz when all I would have been able to do is sit around and be unhelpful in my frustrated silence anyway.

When I finally get to dump my scrubs for street clothes again, it's close to noon. While I'm physically and emotionally drained, I'm looking forward to getting home again – and not just because I get to sleep in an actual bed for a couple of hours straight. Back in our condo I find Bella and Jazz reading their books in companionable silence on the couch, neither of them even looking up as I enter.

I stop inside the door of the living room and look at them for a few seconds, waiting to be acknowledged. When all I get is an absentminded wave from Bella, my conviction that they both need to be taught a lesson is bolstered.

Not that it takes much to reach that conclusion, horny as I am already, but it's not my fault that they are unwittingly playing into my hands like that.

Clearing my throat noisily, I cross my arms over my chest as I approach the couch, until I'm leaning upside down over Bella. This finally makes her put down her book so she can smile up at me. She obviously recognizes the hard look on my face as she doesn't even ask how work has been, but waits almost meekly for me to say something. I don't keep her waiting for much longer.

"That's really no way to greet someone. Playroom, ten minutes, the usual."

Even though I'm frowning down at her, I get a brilliant smile in return, before she gets up with a not quite so meek, "Yes, Master!"

I follow her with my eyes as she skips up the stairs, already losing her clothes along the way like some kind of kinky-superhero-wannabe about to switch identities. Once she is out of earshot I turn to Jazz, who by now has abandoned his book and is looking at me with barely contained excitement.

"You up for your first lesson?"

"Of course!" he replies, then narrows his eyes a little. "But just to make things clear for the dumb newbie, just when do you start the whole roleplaying part of it?"

"Between you and me, it starts when you enter the playroom. We need to talk about a few things beforehand anyway, and I need your honest and blunt answers for that."

"Okay, great, ask away."

Grinning at him for a moment, I turn to the fridge, finding a microwave dish with mac 'n' cheese inside that I heat up while I start to explain.

"Of course we could do a basic demonstration scene, but I don't think it's too much for me to assume you know the difference between a flogger and a cane, so a first-hand experience sounds more fun."

The microwave pings and I get the more or less warmed up container out, too hungry to really care. Jazz has joined me in the kitchen in the meanwhile, still excited but sobering up a little already.

"So what's in store for me?"

"Do you really want to know? I have no problem explaining it all step by step to you now, but it's not going to be that complicated, and not knowing what's coming next might be the more rewarding experience."

"Sure, your call. I trust you with that."

I acknowledge that with a nod.

"Good. My main point with what I have in mind is to see how you react to certain stimuli, and to simply show you how much of a rush it can be when it's not just stop and go like it was with what we did over there at the window."

I allow myself a small smile when his grin gets a little heated, but he doesn't say anything, just nods.

"I know you said before that you're not into pain, but I still think we should put that to the test, if for no other reason than to have you experience how a flogger or cane feels when they are used on you. Don't worry, I'll take it slow, and everything you don't want to take I'm sure Bella will be more than happy to receive."

He looks a bit quizzical at that but finally nods.

"Sounds reasonable."

"Cuffs are okay, too?"

"Sure."

"You know our safeword? Still the same as before."

"Red means stop."

I nod, then finish my meal and chase it all down with half a glass of water.

"Then go upstairs, undress and join Bella in the playroom. When I come in, I want to find you both

kneeling ready for me, waiting to please me."

He swallows thickly at my words, then hurries upstairs to do my bidding, leaving me alone in the kitchen. I check my phone and then shut it off, and read my emails to give them a little more time. When I head into the bathroom they're both already gone, and I quickly take care of business and don my leather pants.

When I step into the playroom at last, I find them both waiting for me –

same position, but the difference couldn't be more obvious. While Bella kneels there with her usual serene elegance, all quiet and calm with her body relaxed except for the muscles required to keep her in an upright kneeling position, Jazz can barely hold still for a second or two. I'm sure that by now his thighs are killing him, as is his back, unaccustomed as he is to staying that way for long periods of time.

As I walk between them to the other side of the room, I pretend not to spare them a glance, but of course that's just part of the game. I still notice how Bella's breathing visibly picks up with her increased excitement, and if I'm not mistaken, Jazz's already semi-erect cock gets harder still. I've missed playing with a male sub. While it's fun to tease a girl about how wet she's gotten from a good spanking, having the much more obvious evidence of an erection in plain sight can be quite arousing. And distracting, I chide myself, forcing my attention to more important things.

As I explained to Jazz before, I plan to stick to the basics, without adding any really advanced elements. For one thing, I'm too tired to come up with something more elaborate, and I also need to know how much he's really into it, too, before I step up the pace. And sometimes the simplest things are the most effective anyway.

Forgoing the ropes completely for the thick padded leather cuffs, I take four pairs from the storage cabinet, dropping two in front of each of my two willing playthings. Bella doesn't move a muscle, but Jazz nearly breaks position before he catches on to her lack of reaction, straightening himself with his hands still laced behind his head.

"You know, if I were a mean bastard, that would already be enough to warrant a quick reminder not to go against my orders," I inform him, grinning. He's now staring straight ahead at my crotch. "Oh, wait, I think I am."

He hesitates, sealing his fate, but then opens his mouth to answer me, nevertheless.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but it's hard to hold this position."

And he is apparently happy to give me a good reason, too.

"Do you think that's news to me?"

"I guess not. Sir."

Now I don't even try to hide my smirk as I lean closer to him.

"Do you think I care?"

"No, Sir," he replies much faster, grinning in spite of himself.

"Damn right I don't. Now pick up the cuffs and crawl over to Bella on your hands and knees, then help each other buckle them onto your wrists and ankles."

There's a definite advantage to having two subs at hand, and while they are busy following my orders, I walk over to my toys and select a flogger and cane, both on the lighter end of the spectrum. Leaving them lying on the padded bench, I pick up a spreader bar, then lower the cable for suspension purposes and attach it to the snap hook in the middle of the bar.

"Come here," I tell them, then connect their wrists cuffs to the ends of the bar, ending with them standing very close, face to face. Their obvious height difference is something I have to overcome, but I don't think Bella will mind some extra strain on herself all that much.

I fetch a pair of wooden cubes and let Bella step onto them, forcing her to widen her stance that way. Using the winch on the wall to raise the bar to where I need it, I force her to stretch her entire body until she's standing on her tip toes, while Jazz can still keep the heels of his feet comfortably on the floor. Chances are that Bella will manage just fine and not lose her footing, but even if that happens she will be fine until I can steady her again.

I take a moment to appreciate them as they stand in front of me, so close to each other that their bodies touch in places. I particularly enjoy Bella's breasts getting squished against his torso, while Jasper's cock rubs haphazardly against her cunt and inner thighs whenever one of them fidgets. For obvious reasons I leave Bella's ankles unrestrained, but on second thought add a second spreader bar to Jazz's, forcing him to keep as still as he can manage with his legs open wide.

Picking up the flogger, I walk in a wide circle around them, drinking in all that smooth skin and tensed muscle in front of me. Bella has a hard time adjusting, her previous calm all but gone, but it's nothing I can reprimand her for. Not that I need a reason to cover her back, ass and thighs in red, really.

While he seems calm enough, Jazz nearly jumps when I let the soft strands of the flogger slide against the outside of his left thigh, then over his ass to the right, but I can tell that he's trying not to move too much. Bella in turn stills when I do the same to her, and only offers the briefest of grunts when I bring down the flogger square on her ass two times. Jazz is a whole different matter, his body now tense from head to toe. Waiting just until I see him relax a bit, I hit him with the soft leather strands, too, softer than Bella but with enough force to sting lightly. He takes it without a sound but doesn't relax like Bella, who seems to lean into the impact while he shies away from it.

Walking around them a few times, I let the flogger land all over their backsides, until I stop behind Bella, stepping close enough to her that my front touches her in several places while I reach between her spread legs from behind. Not surprisingly, I find her pussy wet, and a low moan escapes her when I briefly push two fingers into her.

"So wet," I murmur into her ear, my voice making her shiver. I withdraw my fingers and instead grab

Jasper's cock through her spread legs, adding a low, "So hard." He's just as erect as before, a little at odds with his lack of enthusiasm for my ministrations, but considering how wet he is, too, I figure that his excitement might just stem from something else.

Catching his gaze, I stare intently at him, all the while continuing to stroke his cock, while my wrist pushes from below against Bella's pussy.

"I better not catch that inside of her, or you're going to suffer the consequences. If you don't fuck up I might allow you to fuck her later, but not before I explicitly tell you to."

"Yes, Sir!" he answers immediately, obviously no longer out to test my patience.

Acknowledging that with a curt nod, I let go and step away from them to resume my little game with the flogger. I don't really have to hit much harder to reach the point where he doesn't even relax anymore when I move on to Bella, his small evasive motions away from the hits becoming more jerky by the minute. The signs are obvious and I don't intend to torture him unnecessarily like that much longer, but there's still that matter of him breaking position in the beginning.

"Jazz, do you remember what I told you about not letting a sub get away with even the slightest transgression, to stress that you're not a lenient slob, but deserve their attention and respect?"

From the way he exhales loudly I can tell that he knows what's coming now, and I notice approvingly how he doesn't even try to protest.

"Yes, Sir."

"You know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, Sir."

Apparently the threat of chastisement has stopped short his need to ramble, although I wouldn't have minded a few words more now.

"Because it's your first time I won't be too hard on you. Thirty strokes with the flogger should suffice. Bella, count."

I have no intention of dragging this out, and set to work quickly. He takes each hit with a strained grunt, his head sagging forward against Bella's shoulder, while she counts for him. Her voice doesn't reveal whether she feels sympathy or not. I make sure that each of the thirty strokes counts as the flogger bites into the hard flesh of his ass, clearly on the painful side of things but not cruelly so. He mostly takes it as a man, no whimper escaping him even when I'm done and let my hand touch the warm, now reddened muscles.

Stepping closer to him as I'd done with Bella before, I bring my hand up his side, letting the touch convey my satisfaction at his reaction. He leans into it for a moment, but then gasps when I pull his head back sharply by his hair so that I can see his face.

"Good boy. Keep that up and there's a reward waiting for you later."

I let go of him and walk back to my toy rack to exchange the light flogger for a somewhat sturdier one. I catch Bella smiling slightly when she sees it but Jazz looks a little concerned, yet does his best not to shy away from the next few hits too much. The fact that they don't hurt more than the light strokes from before the thirty heavier ones seems to surprise him, but I pay attention to keep each impact on the pleasurable side of things. Bella, of course, is another matter entirely, and I'm quite happy to tease the first real cry out of her when I hit her hard enough to leave two faint, red lines between her shoulder blades. On my next track around them I see her smile in spite of her clenched jaw, while Jazz is frowning ever so slightly. I can't tell whether it's his protective side rearing its head, or some form of fear that I will hit him just as hard, but for the moment I ignore it.

Things get a little more interesting as I go on, picking up speed while I stay at Bella's back for longer periods of time now, making her squirm on her tip toes. I can tell that Jazz is having a hard time keeping still while she moves so much against him, but then decide that I might as well use that to my advantage.

What I really want to show him with this little demonstration is just how different their likes and limits are – and that to let her get her kick out of it, he has to learn to erase his own trepidation towards inflicting pain, and of seeing it inflicted on her. In that context, having her highly aroused from more than just the pleasure she derives from being flogged only helps my goal, so I decide to use their position to my advantage.

The next time I'm at Jazz's back I concentrate the hits on his ass only, making him jerk his hips forward each time until Bella utters a low moan, clearly affected by the friction of his cock rubbing against her clit and the entire outside of her pussy. While distracted by what I'm doing to him, he still smiles in turn, the effect only increasing when I make her hips rub against his further when I work on her ass in turn. I keep that up for awhile and soon have them at the point where they realize that I want them to move. I'm rewarded with a handful of lusty sighs between Bella's sounds of pain.

As much as I enjoy directing them like this, I soon tire of it, or at least my arm does, so I put down the flogger and pick up the thin cane instead.

Although clearly lost in what is going on, Jazz grows tense all over, and I leave it at a very few stinging impacts on his ass only before I stop again.

He obviously doesn't like them at all, and doesn't really relax when it's Bella's turn. It's almost painful for me to watch him cringe like that, and for future purposes I decide to keep to the instruments that sting less for him, if needed. He still has to learn that I'm not going to bend my plans just because something is making him uncomfortable, but I figure I might sweeten the deal a little for him.

"I want you to kiss each other when I hit you. Show me just how much you enjoy being here like this, dry humping each other."

As expected, they respond immediately, Bella all too happy to open her mouth so Jazz can deepen the kiss momentarily. It's a little awkward at first as they have to learn to coordinate that with their

continuous rubbing and moving against each other's sex, but by the third time my cane lightly touches Jasper's ass, he doesn't seem to mind all that much anymore.

After keeping that up for a few more minutes, I decide that it's time to stop indulging Jazz. Instead I concentrate on Bella, seeing as she's already worked up enough to come soon, although I'm disinclined to let her get there. Putting the cane away I walk back to them; the few extra inches I have on him help me to be able to unhook his cuffs from the spreader bar without having to lower it, and also remove the second bar from between his legs. He staggers for a moment but finds his balance quickly once he has to support his weight completely on his own again.

"Down on your knees, hands behind your back, your face right in front of her cunt."

He quickly complies and I see Bella smile down at him as he gets into position. Leaning down I pull his arms back further, then attach each wrist to the opposite ankle cuff.

"You're only going to lick her when I tell you to, and you'll stop at my command."

Getting the cane again, I'm satisfied when I see him remain still even when she pushes her hips forward with each impact, only getting to the task when I give him the signal. She responds fast with a moan between two grunts, and I decide to step things up further.

Bella doesn't cringe when I exchange the light cane for a heavier one, letting Jazz lick her in the few seconds the switch takes. She barely has enough time to brace herself before I hit her ass hard and fast a few times, her cries now loud and telling of the pain I inflict.

"Stop!"

He quickly obeys even though I don't quit hitting her, although I'm surprised when I see him push his face into her lower stomach as if to steady her while I keep going. I only halt when I can see the deep red on her ass turn darker still, but then switch to her breasts instead, although with a lot less force at first.

"Start!"

Jazz sets himself to the task with new vigor as if to lick away her pain, and in a way that's accurate, judging from the way her eyes roll back in her head when his lips move back around her clit. She's incredibly beautiful, the way she's torn between pleasure and pain, her body covered in sweat and slowly fading marks, all stretched out for me.

We go on like this for a while longer, and I love how much harder I can hit her while Jazz continues to pleasure her as I'm getting close to her breaking point. Somewhere along the way he even seems to lose most of his previous resentment. It's hard not to be fascinated by the spectacle when she's soon moaning with need even when he's not licking her anymore but I'm still covering her ass with welts.

My cock is painfully hard by the time I finally stop, telling Jazz to do the same before I unhook Bella from the spreader bar and help her down to the floor. After spending the better part of half an hour in this position, she's unable to even stand so I let her sit down to lessen the strain on her leg muscles.

Leaving her there I return to where Jazz is still kneeling, watching us with interest, but once he realizes that he now has my full attention, he's focused on me alone again.

"Let's see if I can teach you a few more tricks today, shall we?" I drawl, leering down at him before I reach for the fly of my leather pants and unzip it, letting my cock spring free. "Open!"

He's smart enough to realize what I mean by that and obediently opens his mouth, but I obviously surprise him when I grab his head to keep him still and simply shove my cock inside. He starts choking almost immediately but I take my sweet time pulling back out so he can breathe, my fingers never loosening their hold.

Jazz sputters and coughs a little but at my pointed glare goes still again, his mouth once again open. Letting go of his head with one hand only, I grab my cock and rub it over his face, smearing the residue of Bella's juice all over it before I push it back inside his mouth, only not as deep as before.

"Suck."

He follows my command obediently, but not ten seconds later I halt again.

"No teeth, dammit, you're ruining all your work. You better learn fast and make me come in the next ten minutes, or I'll just leave you all worked up like this while I fuck Bella instead. So, suck!"

Jazz looks a little panicked at first but sets to work quickly, a little more careful now than before.

"Stop! Now pull back until only the head is still inside your mouth, then tease it with your tongue."

A quick study, he picks up my hints fast, also when I make him suck on my balls briefly before I shove my cock back into his mouth. Watching – and feeling – him struggle with his gag reflex as he's kneeling before me is a huge turn on, and is soon too much for me to take when he gets rather good at it.

This time I don't warn him when I'm about to come in his mouth, but relish every second of it while he tries hard not to retch with my cock down his throat. When I'm done, I ease my grip on his hair enough so he can suck and lick me clean, then look over to where Bella is following our every motion with bright eyes. She smiles in return before she looks away, pretending not to have been drooling the whole time while watching us.

When I step away from him and zip myself up, Jazz looks deservedly proud of himself. I knock him down a peg by telling him that he still needs lots of practice, and that if I hadn't been that worked up already he likely would have failed, but he doesn't seem to mind the backhand encouragement at all. Releasing him from his restraints I then turn to Bella, smirking down at where she's seemingly comfortable on the floor.

"You know how I just had your cuffs connected to each other? Do the same to her, but with her lying on her stomach."

A little stunned that I actually let him do anything, Jazz sets to the task, Bella's helpful compliance

soon having her hogtied on the floor, her hands grasping her toes along with the cuffs keeping her limbs locked together.

"Now get on your knees behind her and fuck her."

My simple command seems to stun him, and he's looking a little unsure at first.

"Just like that?"

"Do you need a special invitation? Or another reminder of what happens when you don't comply, quickly?"

It's funny how fast he's on the floor and grabbing onto her hips, but he has already run into his first obstacle. Bound like that, Bella's movements are very limited, and while she can't close her thighs, they're not spread enough to accommodate him. As expected he hesitates, but after another look at me slowly pushes her legs farther apart, his palms pressing against the inside of her thighs.

Bella groans softly, making him hesitate yet again, but this time he's not so easily deterred and keeps going, until he grabs her and pulls her back towards him, drawing an even louder moan from her as he pretty much impales her on his cock. Whatever chivalry usually holds him back is worn down between my command and his own need, and he starts fucking her surprisingly roughly without further ado.

I love the sound of flesh slapping against flesh, underlined by both their sounds of pleasure and Bella's higher yips, speaking of her discomfort. I doubt that she will come quickly, if at all, in this position, restrained as she is. Already I can see her legs trembling. Before long the strain will spread to her shoulders, neck, even her stomach muscles until her whole body is screaming with more than just the need for release.

"Pull her head back by her hair. I want to see her face while you fuck her."

He does as he's told, switching one hand to her shoulder, the other locked in her hair. He pulls her head back as far as he can without hurting her too much. Her eyes are bright and her mouth half open, the look on her face unreadable as it's torn between so many conflicting things that leave her wanting more and more.

I can tell that he's close, but I wait until he finds my gaze and opens his mouth to beg me to let him come, before I utter my next order.

"Stop."

He thrusts hard twice more until his brain registers the meaning of my words, leaving him panting loudly as he forces his body to stop moving.

The way they both look at me, pleading with their eyes, wanting only to reach their climax, gives me a real kick, and I feel my cock stirring again surprisingly quickly.

"Go on," I tell him as I open my pants again, this time shoving them down my legs completely so they don't get in the way any more. Remaining standing in front of them, I start stroking myself while I watch them writhe on the floor.

"A little slower, but try to shove your cock as deep into her as you can.

Make her feel every inch of it."

Bella's eyes roll back at my words and a low keen leaves her when he starts to comply, now also panting into her ear with every thrust. Soon she looks even closer to her orgasm than he does and I order him to stop again, leaving them both lost in their frustration while I keep pumping my fist up and down my cock.

I'm already feeling a little high from the sensation when I finally stop ordering him to hold it time and time again, the sheer power of being in control nearly enough to make me shoot my load as it is. Only squeezing my cock hard helps me hold back as I watch Jazz finally succumb to his need and come deep inside of her with a loud shout, but my patience is worn thin. So thin indeed that I don't wait any longer and simply push him away so I can take her just as he has moments before. Within a few strokes I add my sperm to his deep inside her cunt.

I stay crouched over her for a moment, feeling my heart slow down as the adrenaline leaks from my body, then kiss her shoulder softly before I begin to free her from her restraints. She utters a series of pain filled sounds when her locked muscles are forced to stretch, then relax, and I know that she will be sore for more than just a few hours. She obediently holds still while I unbuckle the cuffs, then rolls into a ball to alleviate the strain her body has been subjected to. I stay kneeling next to her and stroke her sweat soaked hair gently while I watch her relax. Only when I'm sure that she's fine, except for her frustration at not being allowed to come, I look up and signal Jazz to come over.

He's unfamiliarly meek as he crouches down next to me so I can release him from the cuffs, and also remains somewhat subdued when he follows me as I carry Bella over to the shower. We take turns supporting and washing her, leaving her probably more thoroughly cleaned than strictly necessary and even more frustrated than before, but she takes it in stride.

Obviously the mental satisfaction of a wonderful scene far outweighs the downside of not being allowed a physical release. She still has that look in her eyes that I associate with her as my sub, that longing to please me and take whatever I wish to give her, as long as I keep her on a very short leash.

I send Jazz into the bedroom ahead of us, then lift her up onto the counter and get to the more uncomfortable part for her of cleaning her labia piercings thoroughly. They've been healing well but human saliva is about as germ-filled as fluids get, and while I'm sure she's happy to trade the discomfort now for the pleasure she's received, neither of us want to risk her getting infected just because we've been horny and careless.

"That was fun." She finally breaks the comfortable silence while she watches me work, wrapping one strand of wet hair around her finger over and over again.

"You think?" I grin, then brush my thumb over her clit, making her inhale sharply. I chuckle when I realize just how aroused she still is, but abandon teasing her soon after. She doesn't even glare at me, making it obvious just how much she's still in her role.

When I'm done, I pick her up and carry her into the bedroom where Jazz is waiting for us, about as tired as Bella but a lot less strung out. He scoots over when I put her down onto the mattress, then pulls her to him and I crawl under the covers to join them. Like the last time we ended up here together, Bella is content to find herself between us, laughing softly when I nibble on the side of her neck.

Jazz watches us for awhile before he clears his throat, drawing our attention back to him.

"That was unexpected, but I can't say I feel like complaining."

"Well, good for you!" Bella huffs, already sounding a lot more like her usual self. It's funny to watch her use him to pull herself back together, although part of me resents that she feels the need to do so.

"So you'll do it again?" I want to know.

Jazz hesitates but then nods, although a slight frown remains on his forehead.

"If you ditch the cane completely next time, okay." Bella must have made a face for he backtracks almost immediately, adding a quick, "When it comes to my ass, I mean, feel free to work her over as much as she wants."

"Now why does that still sound like you're trying to convince yourself you're okay with that?" I remark dryly, getting a hard look from him in return that somehow amuses me even more.

"Hey, I'm trying, can't teach a dog new tricks overnight! But I have to admit, watching your face light up with intensity while you were making her scream and writhe was a lot more of a turn-on than I expected."

I hadn't even noticed that he was watching me, but stranger things have happened, and his observation leaves me smiling back at him.

"So you won't run the next time if I'm getting out the heavy guns?"

Now he's looking properly cowed.

"Uh, this wasn't what you consider, ah, heavy?"

I don't even have to answer; Bella does it for me when she starts to laugh, rocking us both with the motion of it.

"Are you serious? Jazz, this wasn't really that much more than we did last spring in the woods! Okay, this time you were on the receiving side of things, too, but Edward didn't really hurt me. Sure I might have groaned and grunted a little, and shouted a few times, but that's nothing. Look at my ass, I don't

even have any real marks!"

Jazz seems stunned at her revelation, then actually checks her butt, only finding a residual reddening of the skin but not a single welt that survived long enough to still show.

"Happy now?" she asks, still laughing, before she curls into my embrace again.

"I guess. It just seemed more vicious while it was happening."

"That's part of the game as we play it," I admit, amused by how long it takes him to discern reality from acting.

"Although some parts of it were pretty rough. Like when you were trying to shove me right through the floor while you were fucking me. It's funny that you were all about trying to lend strength to me when Edward went a little enthusiastic with the cane, but you didn't seem to realize just what problems you were causing with your own body weight."

Jazz looks downright guilty at hearing that, a clear admission that she's right in her assessment, but before Bella can drive the point home, I interject to put them both more at ease again.

"That's why it was my call to stop it or let you go on. Getting caught up in the moment happens to everyone, but if you let it happen, you better make sure beforehand that you won't injure your partner for real, or that someone is close by to keep track of what's going on with you. There's a reason why you need to learn things from me."

Bella nods, a little sheepish at her previous words, then adds, "Plus, it's kind of a huge advantage to have someone handy who can drive me crazy with his tongue on my clit so you can beat my ass soundly without having to stop to do that whole pesky jerking me off yourself. Must be so much easier this way."

"So you think it's easier to be in control of two people at the same time compared to just one?"

She huffs, her eyes taking on that playful glint that makes it obvious that she's up to something.

"Maybe not easier, but it can't be that hard."

"Why don't you try it yourself then?"

As the words leave my lips I realize that must have been her goal from the start.

"What a great idea, and coming so out of the blue!" she simpers, then laughs when first I, then Jazz, look quizzically at her. "What, are you afraid I'm going to take revenge on you?"

"The thought might have crossed my mind," Jazz admitted, making her laugh a little wickedly.

"We'll see. It's not like a small woman like me can force two hunks like you to do anything against their wills, right?"

Instead of answering, I kiss her, drowning out her laughter. And true enough, my cock isn't the only part of me already looking forward to this.

Chapter 31

I'm not surprised that once the emotional roller coaster that was our Thanksgiving weekend is over, the days leading up to Christmas seem to zoom by. Maybe it's also because those days are among the best I've had in a very long time, even though at times I feel a little guilty about it.

One thing I'm not surprised at is how easily Jazz integrates himself into our daily lives again. In hindsight, the full impact of just how much I missed him while he was gone is immense, and seeing Bella act as happy and carefree as I do helps me feel a little less like I'm betraying her. Which I am sure I'm not, but having spent months locked inside my own head thinking about my issues with him has left its mark, and it takes more than a few rounds of fucking and a nasty Scrabble tournament to leave all that behind.

Sadly, the universe hasn't gotten the memo that we would appreciate it if everything around us were to stop so we could celebrate our reunion in all sorts of ways; the time I actually end up spending with Bella and Jazz is very limited. I secretly lament that fact but try to be a good sport about it every time I slink off to the hospital. I am ecstatic when, only days before Christmas, I head home from my shift at work, and get a text message on the way that is as cryptic as it is promising.

Mr. Cullen, the college library would like to remind you of your 6:30 appointment at Ms. Swan's office. Please be on time and bring your overdue books with you.

When I finally arrive home, I find the living room deserted. Taped to my intended microwave lunch-slash-dinner is a small, folded paper, covered in Bella's hasty scrawl.

Enjoy the pasta! I don't think I have to remind you to get yourself ready.

Clothes are on the bed. I'm out with Jazz to get some last minute stuff.

Love, B.

That explains why I'm on my own with just under an hour until the designated starting time of our planned scene, and I feel a little cheated of the chance to share my excitement with the only two people who might really get it on every level. Trying not to dwell on that, though, I eat the spaghetti before I take a long shower, going through the usual prep work with diligence and a significant hard-on already.

Because I dawdle a bit I miss Bella's return, finding Jazz blocking the door when I want to go downstairs to greet her, still dripping from the shower and wearing only a towel.

"Sorry, dude, but the missus needs time to get ready herself. Until she gives us a sign, we're supposed to stay in here."

I huff, but then turn around to head back into the bathroom, only to stop halfway there.

"I haven't even had a chance to talk about the scene with her yet."

He smirks and leans against the door, as if to stress that he won't let me through if he can help it.

"Trust me when I say that she doesn't need help. You should have seen her today. She's been bossy since breakfast, and I don't think she'd appreciate you trying to wrestle her out of her role, as it were."

I don't know why his words rub me the wrong way, but do my best to hide my wave of resentment towards Jazz as I return to the bathroom. It takes me another five minutes of rubbing myself down furiously and brushing my teeth to make sense of my own feelings – I'm jealous. Jealous of all the time he gets to spend with her, to be more precise, and the chance to give her the one thing I can't always provide – attention.

And I've spent the last three weeks worrying that Bella might possibly be feeling neglected because now she's no longer the only one in the world that I care about. The fact that my jealousy is completely unrelated to anything sexual only makes me feel all the more ridiculous.

Trying hard to get a grip on myself, I dress and leave the bathroom to Jazz.

By the time he's done I'm once again mostly excited, although I can't shake off my apprehension at heading completely blind into this, even more so as he seems too smug not to be in on some of the plan.

Surprisingly enough, when my phone beeps with a new text message, spelling out only a simple "I'm ready," I don't really care anymore.

"Let's do this, shall we?"

Jazz grins at my obvious excitement, then holds me back at the door.

"Okay, just so you know, Bella wants us to behave like real brats. You know, the whole spoiled rich kid, easy on the eye womanizer kind of guy neither of us was in college, simply because my parents lacked the money and you had too much decency. Or to use her exact words, 'Give me a reason to spank you.'"

I snort, the memory of her lolita schoolgirl act from earlier this year still fresh in my mind.

"Shouldn't be that hard to pull off, I guess."

"That's the spirit!" he laughs, then steps away to let me exit the room. The door to the playroom is closed. With a nod at Jazz, I wrench it open to stagger inside while I make up some bullshit story about a supposed conquest of mine from last night. What I really do is drink in the image presented to us.

The playroom is oddly transformed, although technically the only additions to it are the desk and a chair from downstairs; all the other usual equipment is stored away, leaving the focus on the figure currently residing in the chair.

Red lips, hair up in a severe bun, glasses, dressed conservatively in a crisp, white blouse and a dark gray pencil skirt; I've seldom seen Bella look so hot.

At first she doesn't react to our entry as she pretends to scribble notes on some printed forms. When Jazz lets out a cheesy yet incredibly funny catcall whistle, her head jerks up, annoyance in her gaze as she compresses her lips into a thin line. Even though she already has our attention, she still clears her throat, then addresses us.

"Gentlemen, if you would be so kind as to lower your voices. This is a hall of learning and needs to be quiet; please take your ruckus elsewhere."

Jazz and I exchange glances, before he pulls out a badly abused note.

"I'd love to, but this letter states that I have to be here, so I'm sorry to disappoint you. But if you give me your number, I'd be happy to make it up to you later, baby."

Bella straightens in her chair, pretending to be insulted, but for a moment she breaks role, a smile showing through the severe look she's aiming for.

"Yeah, we're here because we have to meet with the library admin, some old hag named Ms. Swan? But after we're done charming her knickers off, I'd love to get into yours, if you know what I mean."

Her gaze flickers from Jazz to me, her brows raised in a silent 'Seriously?', but she does a good job of looking unimpressed.

"You're looking for Ms. Swan? So you must be Mr. Cullen and Mr.

Whitlock?"

"In the flesh, every glorious inch of it."

While Bella manages not to react, Jazz starts to laugh at the worst line that I've probably uttered in my whole life, but her disapproving stare makes him shut up surprisingly fast.

"Well, then I am sure you will be happy to have found her."

I make a show of exchanging glances with Jazz, then beam my most charming smile at Bella.

"You're Ms. Swan? I should have guessed. With your beauty, you outshine all of the ugly ducklings populating these halls."

She doesn't even smile, which must be hard considering the bullshit I'm making up, but her utter lack of reaction is even more powerful than any biting comment she could have offered. Instead she pointedly looks at our empty hands, then back up to our faces.

"Didn't you forget something?"

"Condoms are in the car, darling, if you need any," Jazz unhelpfully supplies, before we grin at each other again as if we really think that is a great pickup line.

"I meant your books," she clarifies.

"Baby, what I can do to you they don't teach in any books," I drawl, then actually wink at her. She's obviously not impressed.

"Gentlemen, please correct me if I'm wrong, but you don't seem to be taking this matter very seriously."

"It's a bunch of stupid books," Jazz shrugs. "So what, my dad gives a couple hundred thousand to the university each year. I think they can buy new ones from that."

She purses her lips again, then looks down at her forms before she's back to glaring at us.

"This isn't about the money, and your name won't help you in this case, Mr.

Whitlock. If you don't pay the fines and return the books, I will be forced to file an official complaint with the Dean for deliberate destruction of university property, a copy of which will also be added to your permanent student records. If I remember correctly, you both have been warned that any further offenses will lead to your immediate expulsion, as agreed to by your parents."

Trying my best at a sleazy leer, I lean closer, now almost touching the desk.

"But Ms. Swan, I'm sure we can find another way to compensate you for the loss."

For a moment I almost think she's breaking role when she smiles, but then I realize it's a humorless grimace. She slides her fingers over her phone, still holding my gaze.

"Hi, this is Bella Swan from the library. I need to speak to Dean Thomas. Is he in? Why yes, please connect me. I'll hold."

"No, wait!" Jazz hollers, sounding surprisingly concerned, but Bella only cocks one eyebrow without removing the phone from her ear.

"You wanted to say something, Mr. Whitlock?"

"Don't do this, please! We didn't mean it like that, you know? We'll do anything you want, right?"

He looks over at me until I nod, then elaborates.

"Like, we'll mow your lawn, paint your house, take out the trash, wash your car, stuff like that."

"We'll even help in the library, if that's what it takes," I offer, but I can't hold my brief snicker back. Bella's eyes flicker from one of us to the other, but her gaze doesn't lose its hostile, predatory quality.

"Anything? Really?"

"Yes, anything!" we both echo, making her purse her lips yet again.

Keeping up the game, she pretends that her call finally went through, her voice going from hard to buttery soft as she tells the "dean" that she has finished updating the lists and found everything in order. I allow myself a pretend contended exhale, but before I can do more than that, Bella ends the call and fixes us both with a somewhat hungry glare.

"Just to be sure, I will keep these forms until I consider your debt repaid.

Don't worry, boys, I'm sure you're going to enjoy this just as much as I will."

She then gets up for the first time and walks around her chair to the supply cabinet. I'm surprised for real when she gets a small handheld camcorder from inside, and after fiddling with the controls, puts it up on one of the side boards. The recorder is focused on the center of her desk.

"For my own amusement later. I hope you don't mind," she drawls, then puts her hands on her hips and regards us both with a calculating look.

"Strip."

Jazz and I exchange glances, and I can tell that whatever advantage his advance knowledge has given him is now gone. I give a hint of a shrug, then a slight nod at him to go on, letting him take the lead.

"But you didn't respond at all before when we offered to fuck you!"

Her grin is devious, and I feel a little like shying away from her when she comes stalking towards us, her high heels clicking loudly on the floor.

"That's because I still don't want to get fucked by either of you. You said you'd do anything, and yet you balk at the simplest of things. I'm sure the Dean is still in his office; one phone call from me and this whole situation resolves itself. Do you want that?"

He shakes his head, and even manages to look somewhat chagrined.

"Good. Then be good little boys and do what I say now."

Bella turns away and walks back to the door, shutting it with an ominous sound before she returns to her desk. She seems a little more relaxed now as she sits with one leg crossed over her knee.

"I'm waiting. Don't make me tell you again or the deal's off."

Excited as I am, I decide not to make a fuss, but Jazz is a lot slower than me to unbutton his shirt and kick off his shoes. I'm already completely naked, my hands folded over my genitals in a pretend attempt at modesty.

Bella keeps watching us with a serenity that I never thought her capable of, as if she couldn't care less about having two naked men standing in front of her.

Once Jazz is completely naked, too, she allows herself a tight-lipped smile as she scrutinizes us.

"Come on, don't be so shy. Let me see what you're so proud of."

Feeling my mind already slipping into a more obedient state, I drop my hands to my sides, but Jazz is once again reluctant. From the way his whole body vibrates with tension, I'm not even sure it's only an act. I have to admit, it's funny to realize that he has almost no problem submitting to me, but Bella, in full-on Domme mode, makes his hackles rise.

Bella seems to come to the same conclusion as she gets up and walks around us once, stopping behind Jasper. She grabs his arms and pulls them to his sides, needing to use some force. In turn, she snorts when she steps to the side and glances at our cocks – mine is already screaming for attention, while Jazz isn't even semi-erect.

What she does next also comes as a surprise, and again a mixed pleasure as far as Jazz is concerned – she slaps us both in the face, Jazz only lightly, but me hard enough to make me blink with pain for a second. He grunts and automatically steps away from her while I try not to move a muscle, earning an amused snort from her as she gently strokes my cheek where she has just slapped me.

"Aren't you a good little slut? I like that at least one of you has the good sense to behave."

Both her tone and the way she pats my cheek are condescending as hell, causing an unexpectedly deep blush of humiliation to spread over my cheeks, but I'm certainly not going to complain. Jazz looks less happy but she obviously enjoys his resistance just as much as my compliance.

"I don't give a shit if you like what I make you do or not, as long as you keep doing it to my satisfaction," she tells him. The way she looks down on him translates perfectly, even though physically she's the one having to look up into his face. He looks uncertain as to how to react to her revelation but keeps his tongue, earning another smile from her before she stalks back to her chair and sits down with a fluid, elegant motion.

"This just won't do, your cock all dangling down like this, soft and small. At least I hope it gains size once it gets hard, or I will have to start to wonder if you pay the girls to tell everyone that you're hung like a horse. Come on, take care of that yourself."

Gritting his teeth, he does what she orders after spitting into his hand, pumping his cock with jerky motions that are at odds with how fast the results become visible. Bella keeps watching him with a nearly uninterested look, then glances over to me, a suddenly nasty smile on her face.

"Do you like watching your friend jerk off? Let me guess, playing football has always had a special kind of appeal for you, with the sweaty locker room camaraderie and communal showers."

While I really feel like smirking, I try to look offended, but before I can open my mouth she forestalls me with a raised hand.

"I'm not interested in hearing your lame excuses and denials. I don't give a shit whether you like pussies or cocks or both, as long as you keep behaving like the good little boy that you are."

Eventually she seems satisfied with Jazz's work and he stops at her nod, his cock now standing proudly away from his body. Reaching into the top drawer of the desk, she pulls out two small boxes. She places them both on the table, then walks around and stops behind us once more. Extricating something from the first box, she crouches down next to Jazz. He barely has time to smirk at what he likely presumes is going to be a blowjob before he finds his balls gripped tightly. Bella buckles a nifty little leather contraption around them and the base of his cock, ending with his balls pulled down and separated by a thin strap, while a thicker strap is fixed around the base of his balls. I know from experience that while somewhat uncomfortable to some, a spreader/separator combination like that won't be much of a bother to him.

When Bella turns to me and gets a different item from the second box, I realize I won't be so lucky. Still, it's mostly excitement that makes me tense when she grabs my own balls and squeezes them before she pulls them down and brings the two halves of the metal stretcher around them. I can't deny that I am a little uneasy when I realize just how heavy the stretcher is.

The fact that it doesn't just close with a buckle but is screwed shut with a small allen wrench, only adds to the feeling. It's obvious that she has put a lot of thought into selecting the items she has chosen, and I love her even more for it.

I still wince when she withdraws her hands completely and I feel the heavy pull on my balls in full force for the first time. Seeing her smug smile just makes my cock even harder, not that the heaviness and resulting pain will diminish that effect ever. A sidelong glance reveals that Jazz is somewhere between bewildered and slightly horrified, but by the time Bella does another slow walk around us he has managed to wipe the look off his face again.

"Hands behind your heads now, I don't need them getting in the way," she tells us almost casually, and when she walks back into my field of vision she's carrying a crop. Ignoring Jazz for the moment, she focuses on me, letting the sleek impact toy slide up the side of one leg and down the other before she taps my restrained scrotum with it a few times. I can't keep my low moan inside then – it hurts, but at the same time feels so unbelievably good that I'm disappointed when she stops almost immediately.

"Too easy," she smirks, then walks over to Jazz instead, who is eyeing the crop with trepidation. Since our first scene together, a handful have followed, but he hasn't been on the receiving end of anything further as I figured it was more fun for the two of us to teach him what he wants to know by turning him into my side-kick.

Without further warning she brings the crop down on his ass, making him jump and cry out in what I know is more likely shock than pain.

"Oh, did that hurt, my naughty little boy?" she drawls, then adds a few more hits in quick succession. He takes those a lot better, just gritting his teeth against the light pain, before Bella returns to me and treats my ass to the very same. Excited as I am, I don't even feel like it's anything I have to tough out,

and hope that she won't just put the crop away now. It seems to be her favorite toy for when she pulls on her Big Girl Pants in the playroom, and I just love to be on the receiving end of it.

To my slight annoyance, she does put the crop down and lays it across the table, but doesn't sit down yet. Instead she gets another box from the drawer, again starting with Jazz. He looks positively wide-eyed when he sees her pull out a pair of clover clamps, prompting her to offer him another nasty smile.

"Oh, come on, I'm sure you've done your share of mauling your conquests'

tits; you can take a little of your own medicine."

Still smiling, she slowly and deliberately runs a red lacquered nail over one of his nipples until he shudders, before she pinches the clamp on, doing the same on the other side as she ignores the connective chain. When she does the same to me she's not nearly as gentle, first pinching my nipples with her sharp nails, then yanking the chain so that the clamps tighten painfully. And because she seems to enjoy being in real bitch mode today, Bella then picks up four of the small ball-shaped weights I keep for that purpose and attaches them to the middle of the chain, turning the slightly painful sensation into a challenging one. By then she's almost purring with glee as she brings her nails down the side of my torso, leaving hot trails over my muscles. She's clearly pleased at how easily she can get a few sounds of pain from me.

Then she picks up the crop and my balls tighten further with anticipation, yet instead of hitting either of us, she resumes pacing around the room.

"I still have some work to do, so you better not make a nuisance of yourselves. Step up to the desk so that your thighs are flush with it; I want to see those cocks hard and begging for attention on my table."

I immediately follow her order, too much into my role to even consider hesitating, but Jazz takes his time, bringing a small frown of displeasure to Bella's face.

"Is your resolve already so weak that you're deliberately yanking my chain?"

Trust me, you don't want me to repay the favor."

Sitting down, she keeps the crop close to her hand as she picks up her pen again, idly scrawling on the paper while she forces us to wait.

The weights on the chain soon start to bother me, as does the heaviness of the stretcher. The fact that the table is a little too low, making me squat slightly with my thighs tensed, doesn't help matters, either. The way she ignores me, though, is a more cruel form of torture, although I catch her glancing in my direction every so often. Jazz isn't really faring any better although his predicament is by far not as severe as mine, but the minutes crawl by very, very slowly for both of us.

And Bella makes us wait, longer than I have ever left her hanging in a scene. On the one hand I resent her, but on the other I silently applaud her efficiency. It's rare to find someone with so much patience, and I wonder if most of it stems from the fact that, while she obviously enjoys what she's doing, she's

not doing it for her own sake. The thought that being completely at her mercy could possibly mean hours spent in agonizing pain nearly makes me come as I get carried away with a few fantasies I'm sure she won't ever enact, and my excitement obviously doesn't go unnoticed.

"My, my, someone really likes this," she observes, then offers me a dark, lopsided grin. "Let me see if I can sweeten your ordeal even more for you."

She gets up and comes over to me again, her nails painfully sharp when she grabs my ass and digs them into the contracted muscles.

"Spread your legs but keep your cock on my desk. Let's see how your useless balls are doing."

I obey and slowly follow her instructions, managing to keep my cock where it is as I widen my stance as far as I can comfortably accomplish with my hands still locked beside my head. My shoulders and upper arms are already killing me, and I'm grateful when she tells me to lean forward and grab the other side of the desk.

Her touch is almost gentle when she wraps her hand around my tormented, stretched balls, but only for a moment. Then she squeezes, hard, making me scream even though I try to swallow the sound before it can escape.

Lessening the strength behind her grip a little, she continues to massage my balls, the sensation in itself adding to my lust, but also to the general pain level in my body.

"So hard and beautifully red, I like how your balls look like this. But I think you can take a little more."

I can't see what she's up to but I can feel her somehow manipulating the stretcher. Each motion makes me bite down harder on my tongue in order to keep silent, until suddenly the applied weight nearly doubles, causing another grunted shout from me.

"Now you have more of those pretty balls hanging right next to your own balls. What a poetic picture, don't you think?" she asks, then picks up the crop. "Let's see if I can make them dance."

Her assault on my ass is fast, efficient and nearly brutal, her aim a lot better than the last time. She hits the same places over and over again, the repeated impact multiplying the resulting pain until I feel like my whole body is on fire.

"Please stop!" I cry, uselessly of course, but the tension needs to be released somehow. She ignores me, and even seems to hit me harder, until I squirm in earnest. "Please!"

"Such a pansy, really," she huffs as she stops, then rounds on Jazz while I remain panting heavily, half-bent over the desk. "Now it's your turn, *babe*,"

she drawls, flexing the crop menacingly between her hands. He looks ready to either bolt or use his safeword right away, but instead of tanning his ass now, she sits down on her swivel chair, and adjusts it to the lowest setting.

"Come here, over my knees."

He looks at her, perplexed and a little bit stupidly.

"Over your knees?"

"Yes, are you daft? Stand here, then bend over so that your ass is right here across my lap and your palms are flat on the floor. It wouldn't be very good if you fell down the moment I started spanking you, right? And little boys like you deserve to be spanked quite thoroughly."

Even through the receding pain I can't keep a grin off my face. I watch him move into position slowly, then rearrange himself.

"Cock between my thighs, sweets, just where you're so eager to stick it."

Jazz complies, then tries to relax as Bella squeezes her legs shut, but the way he is bent over her, he has to keep his tension up unless he wants to topple to the floor – and with his cock right where it is at the moment that would be a really bad idea.

From where I am I cannot see his face, hidden behind his blond hair, but I have a great view of his ass. When Bella starts to spank him slowly, I feel myself getting turned on more by the minute. Her motions are deliberate; the single spanks well paced with the squeezing of her thighs around his cock, leaving him room when he inadvertently moves from the impact of her palm, but keeping him locked when she's massaging the slowly reddening flesh or digging her nails into it.

"Do you like getting spanked, naughty boy?" she asks him after a while, accentuating her question with three harder hits.

"No," he groans out, his voice so obviously at odds with his physical reaction that I get a stern look from Bella, before she focuses on him again.

"I think you're lying. I think you're having a great time here, just like your friend. Aren't you?"

Jazz murmurs something unintelligible that ends in a clear moan when she hits the right spot again, earning him a snicker.

"Oh yes, you're loving this. Makes me wonder if I shouldn't stop right now."

"No!"

Her resulting laughter is priceless, and she licks her lips as she continues to spank him.

"You better show your gratitude when we're done here."

By the time she finally tells him to get up again, his ass is a uniform red color, and once I get to see his cock again I realize that he must have been very close to coming already. Looks as if spanking is definitely among the things that he likes.

Bella crosses her legs again as she looks from one of us to the other, her smile getting a little twisted around the edges.

"I think it's time that we play a game. The winner gets a special surprise."

Neither of us speaks up, causing her smile to widen into a grin. She gets up and raises her skirt until it is hiked up around her waist, revealing that she's only wearing a white lace garter belt that her stockings are affixed to, but no panties.

"Boys, the rules are simple. Each of you gets two five-minute long turns to satisfy me. Winner is the one who makes me come most often. And before you get your hopes up, you're only allowed to use your pretty mouths, nothing else."

She then looks from one of us to the other again, her gaze finally settling on me.

"I think you should start, seeing as your friend just had the pleasure of rubbing himself all over my thighs."

At her hand signal I push away from the desk, hissing slightly when the motion makes the weights on the nipple clamp chain and the stretcher swing. Moving as slowly as I can manage without being too slow, I round the table and kneel down before her. She makes me scoot back under the table so that she can put her feet, still clad in her high heels, onto the desk surface. That also leaves her pussy conveniently open and at the right height for me to work. Once she tells me to start, I dive in.

While she might have seemed calm and composed until now, a single lick and I can tell just how aroused and worked up she really is. Determined to do my best, I use all the tricks I know work well on her, and manage to make her come twice in the short time span that she grants me. It's fun for once to watch her not hold back in the least, and I even feel a little resentful when she tells me to get out from under the table so Jazz can take my place. On the other hand, watching him eat her out is quite the picture, too, so I can hardly complain.

Then it's my turn again and I try to outdo Jazz. Yet the moment I start teasing her opening with my tongue, my nose rubbing against her clit, I can feel her tense, but not in the way I need her to. She's actively working against me, obviously enjoying me licking and sucking on her clit, but not much more. When I glance up her body to her face, I see her wink at me and I realize that I'm not supposed to succeed with my task.

For a moment I'm confused, then I even feel a little bad – thinking straight isn't exactly my forte at this point with my body and mind screaming with pain and the need for my own release. Lost inside my submissive mindset, going against her orders would mean letting her down, even if that is her intention. It makes me feel helpless and frustrated at my shortcomings, but I can't ignore that wink and try, against her wish, to make her come again.

Eventually my time is up and she pushes away from me, making me feel forlorn and guilty as she signals me to get up. True resentment grips me hard again when I have to watch Jazz rise to the occasion with alacrity, and Bella gripping his hair and humping his face only makes things worse. It's

not a sense of betrayal that I feel – as right now, she can do no wrong, and whatever she decides I will bow to gladly – but I hate feeling so utterly useless.

It's been a while since anyone has managed to drag my mind that far under, and while I hate how I feel right now, I love it just as much at the same time.

At least some of my forlornness must have shown on my face. Halfway through Jazz's five minutes, Bella turns her face to me, her eyes studying me intently. She's absolutely gorgeous the way her face is flushed and her eyes are wide and glassy with her impending orgasm, but the fact that it's not entirely due to my actions dampens my joy at seeing her like that. A hint of a frown appears on her forehead, but before it can develop into anything more she comes, her eyes losing focus for a few seconds.

I have to look away from her then because I feel my mood drop even more, but a moment later my eyes snap back to hers when I feel her hand slowly slide up the side of my thigh. She offers me a slightly twisted smile as she reaches for my balls, but her touch remains gentle as she strokes the stretched skin above the heavy metal ring weighing down my scrotum.

"Kiss me," she orders then, her voice a little breathy but still full of confidence and the certainty that she will be obeyed. Those two words act like a switch on the turmoil churning in my brain – suddenly I have a task, and I set to it fast. It's a needy, passionate kiss that I place on her lips, eagerly pushing my tongue into her mouth as she opens to me. Bella moans in response, the sound so hot and filled with lust that it drives the last bit of resentment away, even when her fist suddenly closes around my balls and she pulls and squeezes hard until I cry out into her mouth. I wouldn't have dared pull away from her, neither with my lower body nor my head, but the hand that has previously kept Jasper's face where she wanted it is now bunched up in my hair, tugging on my roots while she forces me to keep on kissing her through her last orgasm.

She lets go and pushes away from us both, panting heavily, a grin on her face like the cat that just licked the cream. Her eyes are sparkling with mischief, and after looking from one of us to the other a few times, her gaze settles on Jazz.

"Congratulations, I think we have a winner."

Getting up more smoothly than should be possible after coming so often and so hard in the last minutes, she pushes her skirt down her legs and straightens the fake glasses on her nose, then steps closer to him.

He winces as she reaches up and removes both clamps from his nipples, the sound quickly turning into a moan when she laps and sucks on each nipple to take the pain away. Then she removes his cock ring / ball separator contraption, her fingers kneading his freed scrotum almost lovingly.

"Are you ready to claim your prize?"

"Whenever you are," he drawls back, all cocky once more, but his obvious expectation just makes her grin widen.

"Oh, you're not going to get to fuck me. I have no interest in becoming just another one of your conquests. No, you're going to fuck him now," she replies, nodding in my direction.

Jazz goes eerily still at that, and for a moment I'm not sure if it's good acting or real uncertainty. It becomes obvious that it's the latter when he doesn't even try to offer any foolish, bravado-driven denial his role might warrant now. He tries to catch my gaze, but I'm playing dumb and stare at Bella's shoulder instead. I'm all for it, obviously, but don't want to break role even for a moment – she made me her bitch tonight, and it's not my place to consent to anything she orders. Call me mean, but part of me is laughing my ass off at him right now.

Bella picks up on his uncertainty just as I do, only for once she is the one who has to deal with it – and does, with uncommon gentleness in her voice, obviously talking as Bella now and not the sadistic librarian.

"Jazz, it's been twenty-three days. You two kiss, make out, grope each other, jerk each other off, give each other blowjobs, but then you always stop, and somehow I end up on the receiving end of everything else that follows. I really don't mind getting DP'd on a nearly daily basis, but it's so obvious that you're stalling – and just to be clear, I mean both of you – that I, at least, am getting tired of this. I think it's obvious that you both want this. Don't even try to deny it because right now I'm holding the obvious sign of your eagerness in my hand. If you really need an incentive, here you go. Put on a show for me, and make it worth those twenty-three days of my mind running wild."

He doesn't say anything but his answer is obvious when he straightens, visibly shaking off uncertainty and doubt.

"And just in case you missed the glaring neon sign, he doesn't want you to be nice and gentle and thoughtful – he wants to be fucked. So do both of yourselves a favor and fuck him," she helpfully supplies as she steps away from him, succinctly biting off the last two words of with such heat that my body almost physically responds to her demand. Jazz raises his brows at her questioningly but she doesn't react, silently telling him to just go ahead.

Turning away from him, she sits back down in her chair, relaxed but once again assuming that elegant yet confident position that she has shown so often today. She reaches into the drawer, takes out a bottle of lube and puts it down on the desk top, the sound strangely ominous.

As if that were a sign – which in a way it really is – Jazz breaks his momentary apathy and crosses the short distance between us. Gone is the hesitancy, gone is all the doubt; all that's left is horniness and his obvious intent to take his satisfaction where he can. He's rough as he grabs the hair at the back of my head and forces me to face him, almost sneering into my face as he pulls me close.

"You're going to suck me off now, bitch, and you better do a good job or I'll find something else besides my cock to ram up your ass!"

Normally I would have laughed at a sentence like that, but right now it makes my knees weak. That is not a bad thing as he pushes me down onto them a moment later, grabbing my head with both hands after he shoves his straining cock into my mouth. While I'm not exactly out of practice, his

forcefulness surprises me and makes me choke. Instead of easing up, he holds me hard against him for several seconds while I struggle feebly, then only lets up long enough for me to draw a gasping breath. I love how he shows no mercy and starts ramming his cock into my mouth before I can start sucking on my own, and doesn't even ease up when I do my very best to add to his enjoyment.

The roughness of our motions does absolutely mean things to the weights still fixed to the connective chain of my nipple clamps, distracting me from the blowjob and giving him an excuse to be even more 'unsatisfied' with my compliance.

"Do you have something here that I can get his hands out of the way with?"

He's struggling too much for my comfort."

From the edge of my field of vision, I see Bella get up but I can't concentrate on what she's fetching as Jazz resumes fucking my throat. I find out soon enough when the cool steel of a handcuff suddenly bites into my left wrist, then my right, as Bella pulls my arms together behind my back.

"Does our little fuck toy not like being used like this? Such a shame, because I love watching you like this," she purrs into my ear, then resumes her place as a spectator.

Jazz goes right on, obviously enjoying my increased degree of helplessness, and it doesn't take long until he shoves his cock into me as far as possible, and keeps my face pressed against his body while he shoots his load down my throat. I try to relax but eventually my gag reflex kicks in again, making me cough and sputter once he lets go, but he doesn't show any mercy.

He draws me to my feet by grabbing my right elbow, then drags me over to the desk. I grunt loudly when he slams my body against the sturdy wood, the edge digging into my thighs. He keeps holding me right there with one hand in my hair as he draws my head back painfully, exposing my neck to him. I shout again when he suddenly bites down on my shoulder in a weird display of dominance, but I can't deny that I get off on that, too. Keeping my head bent back and to the side like that, his other hand gropes for the nipple clamp chain, and yanks on it hard when he finally gets a grip on it.

My cry is one of real agony. I'm sure that if he realized just how much he's really hurting me, it would disturb him, but I'm quite happy with the fact that it doesn't. Things get even worse when he doesn't detach the first clamp neatly but pulls it off, then pinches my nipple deftly between his thumb and forefinger. I see Bella wince but she doesn't say anything, remaining sitting with her legs crossed and her fingers laced together over her knee.

I manage not to wallow like a baby when he removes the second clamp, but my nipples are still throbbing with pain when he pushes me down onto the table, his hand now at my neck to keep me down. He pushes my right knee upwards until it stays pressed into the wooden top, too. The move thankfully raises my ass a little more in the air and my cock is no longer wedged between table and my body. He briefly strokes it as he pushes it in the direction of my raised thigh.

More for show than anything else, I try to fight, but I'm helpless with my hands still cuffed behind my back. Instead of slapping my ass for that, Jazz grips my still weighted-down balls and pulls them

further away from my body while at the same time squeezing them roughly, making me cry out –

and go still – again. He keeps up the pressure for a few more seconds, then increases it until I start struggling in earnest. Unlike Bella, he's a better judge of how far he can go there, and is quite happy to push that boundary.

I'm panting with relief when he lets go of my tortured balls. His grip on my neck remains even while he opens the bottle of lube with his other hand and pours a very liberal amount down my ass crack. I feel some of it dribble down my painfully extended scrotum, too. Before I can wonder if it was just an accident, he resumes kneading my balls deftly, if less painfully than before.

"You like that, don't you?" he observes, his voice a mean rasp in my ear as he leans into me. He switches from holding my neck to shoving my shoulders into the wood with one forearm pressing horizontally into my shoulder blades. I grit my teeth, trying not to make a sound, but it's a useless endeavor. My pants and grunts soon fill the air of the playroom.

The way my cock keeps rubbing against my thigh only increases the need to come, and I'm nearly there when the bastard stops.

Fuck, but sometimes I hate being a good teacher.

Jazz waits a while before he pours more lube between my ass cheeks, then starts to spread me open. He's neither gentle nor slow, starting with two fingers that he really has to work into me, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from shouting at him to stop being such a dick. Eventually my sphincter gives and I start to relax, enjoying the whole thing a lot more now.

He keeps pushing, jabbing three fingers fast and deep into me, and I'm already close to coming again when he stops and withdraws completely, also removing his arm from my upper torso.

For a moment I consider trying to rear up, but I really, really want his cock in my ass next, so I remain sweating and panting where I am. Jazz lubes up his dick while Bella still pretends to be mostly unaffected by what is going on right in front of her. I'm a little disappointed that she doesn't seem to want to finger herself while she watches us fuck, but it fits the role she's been playing perfectly – and somehow that cold curiosity is a huge turn-on, too.

Finally he's done stalling and I feel Jazz's cock slide into me, meeting little resistance after the delicious abuse I already suffered at his fingers. He doesn't dawdle, doesn't wait, but grabs my hips tightly and starts fucking me without further ado. The sheer power of his motions makes my body and the table underneath me rock while his balls slap against mine, the whole to and fro motion adding yet more pain to my scrotum as my balls swing with each of his thrusts.

I can't hold back and I don't even try, giving myself over to the climax. It nearly wipes out everything around me for a few seconds, then adds a heightened sensitivity to the sensations assaulting my body. Having come in my mouth not long ago, Jazz holds out a lot longer, pounding into me hard and fast until I feel like I can't stand it any longer before he orgasms himself. He sags down on top of me, completely spent in more ways than one, waiting until his slowly softening cock slides out of me.

I'm so tired that I don't even move when he pushes away from me, leaving me lying like that on the table. I'm still trying to gather my wits and strength when Bella gets up and removes first the cuffs, then the weights from the stretcher and finally the hellish thing itself. Unable to hold in the whimpers of pain anymore, I scrunch my eyes shut and ball my hands into fists as I tough out the final waves of pain, eased by her gentle hand massaging my tormented balls until I eventually fall silent.

I want nothing more than to crawl into bed now and sleep curled around whoever comes close enough to grab – and maybe take a shower first, seeing as this time it's me ending up covered in sweat, come, snot and tears – but Bella quickly disabuses me of that notion. She throws my discarded clothes at me, telling me to get dressed. I stare somewhat balefully at her but she only answers with a nasty grin, still acting all unapproachable bitch.

When I'm finally done I join Jazz in front of her desk, not looking at him. I figure I might as well finish this with the minimum amount of roleplay as Bella has already made me get dressed again. We watch in silence as she shuts off the camcorder, then puts it into her desk before she sits back down and regards us levelly. With mirth I notice that she stays clear of the desk, the 'forms' on top now all crumpled and smeared with come, but that doesn't diminish the effect of the way she watches us at all.

"I think that went quite well," she surmises, allowing herself a small smile. "I expect that in the future you will pay better respect to the rules of this library. Just to be sure, I will keep the video file of this enlightening little tryst, and should either of you ever disturb the peace of these halls again or be late in returning your books, I will be very thorough in refreshing your memory. Although, if you feel the need for some extra credit, feel free to approach me about that in the future. Now off with you, I don't have the patience to keep wasting my time with imbeciles like you!"

Clearly dismissed, we both nod, then turn around and trudge out of the room. I close the door behind me without making much of a sound.

I haven't yet fully turned around when Jazz sags down onto the floor, obviously just as tired as I am, but with a huge grin on his face.

"Shit, I didn't think she could be that scary! Can you believe that?"

I give him a long look, then laugh, mostly at his incredulity.

"Dude, accept it, she's no longer the little girl whose pigtails you used to yank! Of course she can be scary as hell. She's probably just imagining how she herself would want to be barked at, to turn that around on us. And, by the way, do you ever intend to play with a guy other than me?"

My question seems to come out of the blue for him, and he clearly doesn't know how to take it.

"Not really. I meant it when I told you that aside from you, I think I'm still mostly straight. And I don't think I would want to play with another guy even if I found him attractive. I mean, for me, this is something personal, between us, and only the three of us."

"Good," I huff, then sit down beside him, wincing when my ass hits the floor. The whole region

between my hips and my knees feels like a war zone, and while I love how the residual pain makes me feel, that doesn't mean that I also have to like all of the discomfort it brings.

Only when I relax do I realize that Jazz keeps staring at me a little weirdly.

At my raised brow, he narrows his eyes at me a little.

"Are you jealous? That I might someday want to play with someone else?"

"No!" I quip, then realize that both my tone now and the way I've asked the question could lead him to think just that. "No, I'm really not." I try to diffuse the situation, but when he keeps looking at me like he doesn't believe a word I say, I start laughing.

"Jazz, no. The reason I asked is because if you ever intend to play with someone who's not as much of a masochist as me, I'd have to drag you into the playroom now and show you, first hand, just how much what you did to me hurt. Plain and simple, it's a safety concern, not a passive-aggressive way of weaseling some kind of admission or promise out of you."

For a moment he grins with relief at the misconception, but then looks guilty.

"That bad? Shit, I didn't think... but you didn't really protest and I -"

"Stop rambling," I huff, then snort. "Of course I didn't protest. I was having the time of my life between her going all Ice Queen Bitch on me and you finally accepting and acting on your own dominant need. It was all well within the limits of what I can take, but it felt like you were caught up in the moment and somewhat oblivious of the pain you were causing, and it's my job to rub your nose in that now. You've still got a lot to learn, young Padawan."

As I've intended, he chuckles at the quote, then the quality of his gaze changes a little, the intensity rising. I don't have to wait long before he leans over and kisses me, finding me only too happy to participate.

Bella finds us like that a little while later, sweaty and tired on the floor, making out like two high school kids in the backseat of a car. Her amused laughter prompts us to break off and get up, and we dutifully follow after her as she walks through the bedroom and on towards the shower. On the way she discards the heels she's carrying in one hand while she unbuttons her blouse with the other.

If Jazz or I had been any less dead tired we might have tried to playfully get some payback from her now by undressing and teasing her, but as it is, we're barely able to keep standing upright and make it into the shower. She joins us once she has removed her own clothes, still grinning at us while she squeezes between us to reach her body wash. Not even her ass rubbing against my abused crotch makes me want to bend her over and fuck her. Well, maybe in a few hours, when I'm still sore but emotionally back to normal enough that I feel the need to wrestle control back from her.

Right now I'm happy to leave it at soaping up her tits while I stand behind her and kiss her slowly and tenderly.

Chapter 32

Ever since Thanksgiving I've been dreading Christmas, but it turns out that all the advance worrying and cringing is for naught.

For the first time in ages my parents have decided not to celebrate at home, but jet to Hawaii instead. I can see my mother's hand in that, but don't feel like complaining. In the card attached to the envelope she's left for us, she snidely comments that she's also 'giving us peace and quiet'

together with plane tickets and a hotel suite reservation for three for the week of the US Open of Surfing in Huntington Beach, California, the first week of August.

The rest of our collective family members we avoid like the plague, feeling childish about it, but Thanksgiving has left us uniformly weary. We've decided not to tell anyone yet that our happy threesome living arrangement feels like it's bound to stay permanent. Due to distance and busy schedules, Jazz drops out of seeing his folks, and Bella takes the drive to see Charlie and Sue alone, combining it with meeting someone for an interview in northern Oregon.

The week before Christmas, we are obliged to attend the various Christmas parties for our respective workplaces, but somehow the three of us always avoid showing up together. The fondue evening at Rose and Emmett's hardly counts as a social minefield, although some altercations ensue over dropped and supposedly stolen meat and vegetables. I call or email most of our other friends, and in the end there's only one glaring omission on that list – Alice.

The days around Christmas and New Years are spent in fear of the next phone call from one enraged relative or another, as Alice knows them all and is bound to talk to them. Her behavior at Thanksgiving dinner has shown that she's fully capable of planting the seeds of potential future disasters, but when the second week of January rolls around without Charlie knocking on our door, a sawed-off shotgun at the ready, I slowly start to relax.

Life is busy enough as it is, with extra shifts at the hospital, new coworkers, a second permanent assignment for Bella and plenty of projects for Jazz's budding business. Even if I had the time I wouldn't be able to meet with anyone, but as the weeks go by, I realize that the dissension with my closest friend of so many years is eating me up.

And it's not just me, or rather, my own grumpiness is slowly beginning to weigh on the others, too. Bella is starting to snap at me in every other conversation we have, few as they are because of my crazy work hours, and Jazz is acting weirdly at times. Only when we fuck do things seem to even out and return to a harmonic state, but even a horndog like me eventually realizes that this is not a good state to be in. Even less so when things are emotionally complicated to begin with.

And complicated they are. Although I'm trying to fight it, I find myself prone to being jealous of all the time Bella and Jazz get to spend together while I'm not around. I know that they don't fuck – not only because it should be obvious as their behavior towards each other hasn't changed at all, but also because Bella screams it in my face when I behave like an ass one evening and hint at them getting it

on behind my back. She doesn't talk to me for three days afterwards – the first deliberately, and the next two because of a forty-hour shift - and then ignores my attempts to apologize.

Jazz tries to stay out of it but is obviously on her side. He only responds to my questions with short answers; his own disapproval is so plain in every word and every look that I feel even worse.

Somehow living together turns out to be a lot more work than any of us seemed to have expected.

But it's not only me who causes dissent. Bella and Jazz also do their own damage, keeping things less than harmonious between us as the weeks pass by. While not an issue at first, the severe lack of privacy is driving Bella mad, used as she is to spending her days on her own, and since we've been together, some of her nights, too. More than once I've come home to find them fuming at each other. Bella goes ballistic when Jazz spends a night at one of his business partners after working long past their sketchy business hours. Instead of being able to savor an evening together with just the two of us, she glares at me whenever I try to touch her. The moment Jazz returns in the morning, she's in his face. Stupid as I am, I try to pacify her even though I myself can't help but be a little suspicious of what he has been up to. When my patience finally snaps and I order her to shut up and go upstairs, I'm the one she ends up being mad at. I have to run to work so I try to ignore her baleful stares, and the merry tip-toeing around each other starts anew.

Rose is the only one I feel I can talk to about this, seeing as she's also hungry for attention and someone to talk to who has the intellectual capacity to at least carry on a conversation. She's mostly amused but doesn't laugh at me, but she does give me the only piece of sane advice that she can – hang in and work it out.

Of course that's a lot easier said than done, but eventually I reach a point where I decide that I'm not doing anyone a favor by ignoring the one thing I can get resolved without either Bella or Jazz sabotaging me – my friendship with Alice.

I have to admit, I'm not sure I want to mend things with her when I ring her doorbell and wait for her to buzz me in. The things she said in the past are enough to make me want to cut her out of my life completely without a second chance, if she really believes them. It would be so easy to ignore that 'if' and mentally replace it with an 'as', like Bella does, or try to get over her without wanting to see her ever again, like Jazz, but that's not my way.

The more I think about it, the more my mother's words make sense to me.

As things aren't entirely awesome between me and the other two, I decide I might as well give Alice one chance to explain. Knowing her, I don't even expect an apology, and I don't dare to hope that, even if everything resolves itself miraculously, our friendship will be as it was before, but I just need to know.

She doesn't answer the door and my heart sinks, but I'm too set on this to give up now, so I get my phone out and call her. A wise decision as it turns out, minutes into our phone call. At first she's wary and sounds cold, but still agrees to meet me later at her place, when she returns from the photo shoot she's at right now. By the time I hang up, we both sound almost civil, so I try not to panic until I get

back to her door three hours later.

I don't know what I was expecting, but when I see her standing at the door, holding it open for me, my first reaction is concern. It's been over two months since I last saw her, and the woman standing there neither resembles the vibrant, immature girl I've known for more than half of my life, nor the self-righteous bitch I learned to hate over Thanksgiving. She has gained weight - at least ten pounds - and it actually looks good on her, but her eyes are sunken and surrounded by dark rings, speaking of lack of sleep and other things. I've never seen her wear so little make-up or almost ordinary clothes.

"Hi," I offer as I stop at the door, not knowing what else to say.

"Hi," she echoes. "Do you want to come in? I'm only blocking the door to keep Mr. Fibbins from escaping into the wild freedom of the stairwell."

"Mr. Fibbins?"

Before she can answer, a black furry head appears at her ankle, bright green eyes staring at me before the cat gives a demanding yowl. Alice smiles and picks him up, rubbing her face in his fur as she steps aside to let me in. I follow, even more bewildered. Alice and a cat? Unlike many women I know, she's never liked pets, and I can only imagine what the shedding fur and the claws will do to her design projects.

Although I've been to her apartment more times than I can count, it's as if I'm stepping into another world. Of course there's the addition of a cat climbing tree and a few pillows for the furry critter to sleep on, but that's not the most obvious change. Gone is all the clutter, the tons of useless yet decorative items, leaving the old furniture looking completely different.

Everything is clean and simple, making our condo look like Ikea exploded in it by comparison.

"Alice, what's going on?"

I'm still standing near the closed door, and haven't even taken off my shoes and coat, but I can't ignore this a moment longer. It feels as if I'm caught in a David Lynch movie.

Putting the cat down on the sofa, Alice turns back to me, a flicker of her old self surfacing when she raises her brows.

"What do you mean? I've redecorated, so what?"

"Redecorated?" I ask lamely. She nods, but then chuckles sadly, shaking her head.

"Not just my flat, though. Do you want coffee? Tea? Soda?"

Shaking myself out of my apathy, I ask for coffee, then walk over to the sofa. I sit down opposite the cat, who, ignoring the general weirdness of the situation, is licking his butt. Alice soon returns with two cups of coffee, then, after another trip to the kitchen, a plate of cookies that she puts down on the table between us. Not some fat-free, low carb, no sugar atrocities, but normal, honest-to-God

homemade chocolate chip cookies. I watch with even more wonder as she pops one into her mouth, then munches for a second without even batting an eyelash.

Of course she notices my stare but ignores it, adding sugar to her coffee before she starts spooning the milk foam the top.

"How are things at the hospital?" she asks, idly scratching the cat between his ears. Forcing my bewilderedness to stop messing with my vocal chords I shrug.

"Hectic, the usual. We've got a new Orthopedic Surgeon; half of the doctors hate her, the nurses love her, and we're becoming friends fast. Her name's Zoe Thompson, and she's from Bristol. England."

"Oh, the British Invasion is rallying for a new wave," Alice jokes, then falls silent, the moment immediately turning awkward.

"And you?" I ask, nearly tripping over my own words.

"Hectic, the usual." She repeats my sentence again, her smile slowly gaining in sincerity. "Working with the Brits seems to be a common theme of late. I'm co-designing a new line with a new design label from London.

Very low-key, off the catwalks, but she's got great connections to a few Indie bands who we're trying to convince to do the marketing for us if we give them the clothes for free. Who knows, *SplashDump* might be the new *Kings of Leon* in a year or two. And if not, I still get to travel to London every few weeks and listen to awesome music. Things could be worse."

It's as if I don't even know the woman sitting there, grinning for a moment with the obvious joy change is adding to her life.

"What about your other work, your label?" I can't even remember what she called it, but she doesn't seem to mind my slip.

"Sold it."

"Just like that?"

"Yup. Figured it was a good time, seeing as my assistant was ready to mutiny and defect to a major label, so I offered to let him take over.

Technically I still own ten percent of it, enough to pay the rent, but he doesn't even need my okay on any executive decisions besides re-selling the company or kicking me out completely."

"And you're okay with that?" I don't even try to hide the incredulity in my voice. Her label has been the only thing she's lived and breathed for since her second year in college, and dumping all that seems just insane.

"Do you mind if I excuse myself for a moment? Need to use the bathroom,"

I offer lamely, then quickly get up when she just nods.

"You know the way. But if you're looking for any kind of anti-depressants or other psychotropic drugs in my medicine cabinet, I can spare you the trip.

You won't find any."

I halt in mid-step, biting my lip at having been caught, but still continue on my way there, although I keep my activities to just taking a piss. When I return, Alice is sporting a half enigmatic, half wry smile.

"Found what you were looking for?"

"Toilet paper and soap, yeah, but without the knit doily I nearly didn't recognize the backup roll."

"Smartass," she snorts, then nibbles on another cookie. Seeing as my stealthy attempt has failed, I go on the offensive.

"Not that I disapprove, but why the change? All this -" I look at the spartan décor around us, "so doesn't fit you."

"Maybe I just didn't fit the frills anymore?" she offers, then finishes her coffee and gets up for a refill. I check, she even takes real cream. No wonder she has put on weight, pushing her into the comfortable lower range of what a woman her height should be. When she returns she hauls the cat onto her lap, not reacting to his claws sinking repeatedly into her dark blue jeans.

"Do you really want to know?"

I nod, then try to be the one to offer the white flag first.

"Friends care about what happens in each other's lives, right?"

"I guess they do," she says, but contrary to what I have been hoping for, she sounds sad. Then she narrows her eyes and looks intently at me, the cat all but forgotten. "Do you realize that I don't even know what field of medicine you chose? I mean, I know now because I ran into Esme last week and asked her, but you must have told me hundreds of times and I only remembered which hospital you were interning for because your dad worked there for years. Doesn't that strike you as peculiar?"

I don't really know what to say, but I can guess what she wants to hear.

"Alice, you've always been a superficial person -" I can barely censor the need to say 'bitch', "and about as egocentric as they get. But that's nothing new, I wouldn't have been your friend for so long if I hadn't accepted that, nor would I have shown up here with the expectation of finding anything different."

For a moment she seems ready to cry, but then gets a hold on herself, trying hard to pretend my words didn't affect her.

"Well, guess that means the long version then."

She falls silent for a moment, gnawing on her lip before she resumes talking.

"I guess I finally realized that things were not right. With me. All around me.

To be honest, first I believed everything and everyone else wasn't right, but eventually a bit of self-reflection started seeping in. After Thanksgiving -"

she stops, then swallows but goes on immediately, "I told Nate that I needed to be alone. I shut myself in, turned the phone off, disconnected the landline. I think I cried for a straight day. Then I fell into some kind of apathy, didn't sleep, eat, shower, read, watch TV, just sat there and did nothing. I got lonely, then cried again when I saw that I only had three missed calls on my phone, and all of them were from my assistant. I went out to get a cat, for company if you will, but the local pet shop couldn't tell me the addresses of any of the high class breeders of any of the breeds I was considering. A little desperate at that point, I went to the animal shelter down the street and picked up Mr. Fibbins. He looked so alone but kept hissing at anybody who came close, and I felt an instant connection."

I briefly look at the cat, purring and completely at ease, wondering at just how weirdly in sync they are.

"Of course when I got home he just added to the chaos, and when cleaning up after him became too much of a bother I started throwing things away that he broke. And then other things, too, until all the clutter was gone. He only drinks cream so I had to get some, and when the bottles always went bad, I started drinking it, too. Then I ran to the closest supermarket, bought a ton of chocolate, ate it, then made myself puke because I had eaten it.

Realized that bulimia wasn't something I needed to drag myself into again, so I forced myself not to puke after the next bar. It tasted really good, even if I cried through most of it."

"Again?" I have to interrupt her, suddenly weary.

Alice offers me a small smile. "There are things you don't know about me, either, not just the other way around."

Exhaling loudly, she resumes, her tone once more clinical and flat as she continues with her recount.

"Then Christmas, I went to see my family, big mistake. My mother was horrified at the cat hair and the one scratch on the back of my hand, then was scandalized that I was drinking coffee with real cream, and told me I looked unhealthy because I had started to gain weight. I just turned around and called a cab, and spent the night in a hotel at the airport before I caught the next flight home. Then I threw out the remaining clutter, and brought half of my wardrobe to the nearest homeless shelter. Just couldn't look at it anymore, it had *her* written all over it, not me.

"Because I couldn't work, either, I went to see some college friends of mine who had moved to London, where I met Cecile, and realized just how much more I loved working with her. Sold my label, as I said, got a new 'healthy living' cook book, then bought a bunch of ten dollar a pair jeans

and they were the best ones I had ever had. And ever since then I have pretty much have been working on building the new me."

I take that all in in silence, and I don't know what to say even when she's done. While I hung out a lot at her family's home before they moved to Florida a few years ago, I never realized the amount of tension that must have existed between Alice and her mother that would cause things to blow up like that, but in hindsight it all makes sense. I guess I always thought they were just close, but not in a way that made Alice feel like she had to eventually break away from her.

"What about Nate?" I finally ask when the only other thing I can think to bring up is more likely to cause some nasty bickering.

"We broke up. Kind of," she sighs, then shrugs. "I told him I really needed to be alone, he tried to offer me a shoulder to cry on, and I kicked him out, telling him I didn't need anyone's sympathy. He still wouldn't go and I told him that I'm not the woman he thinks I am. He told me that I don't know that, and that I'm not really like I acted at the dinner. We kept fighting, and he finally left me alone when I promised I would call him once I felt better.

We've been on a few dates since then, but I'm keeping my distance. He still insists that he sees the real me and has fallen in love with her, but how can he see that when I can't? Guess I'm too weak to cut him free, but he's old enough to know if he wants to waste his time with a crazy bitch or not. We'll see, maybe eventually I'll trust him and believe him, seeing as I can't see anything clearly anymore."

It's strange that she sounds more like she's musing over the topic, detached and trying out possibilities in her head, than talking about her love life. She's weirding me out, but at the same time I feel like this is the first real conversation we've had since

ever.

Before I can think of a reply, her gaze turns a little jaded, and she herself pokes the big elephant crammed into the room with us.

"So how are things with Bella and Jazz?"

No way to avoid that topic now.

"Difficult but good."

My answer doesn't sit well with her, but not for the reasons I expected. She mostly seems as if she's hurt but not surprised that I don't go on explaining.

"Guess it must be difficult with three people in the mix, when two are sometimes already impossible enough."

I grin in spite of myself, considering how often Bella alone calls me

'impossible'. Alice keeps looking at me expectantly, so I finally try to add a few more sentences.

"True, but the problems we keep bumping into aren't the ones I've been waiting for. It sometimes seems as if we're deliberately trying to drive each other crazy. And many things explode way more quickly than they used to, and everything escalates, but also diffuses faster. Or maybe that's just us - mope, shout, then make up. You just end up saying things differently to a friend than to someone you love, and the weird mixture we're cultivating is forming its own dynamic in that spectrum."

She nods as if my words make sense to her, then munches another cookie.

"Just how mad are they at me?"

I consider what to tell her for a long time, but don't know what to say in the end.

"Why did you say what you said at Thanksgiving?" I ask her instead, feeling that if I understand her, maybe I can give her a better explanation about how things are between us and her.

Alice falters for a moment, and for a while I think she is just going to shut me out again and not tell me anything at all, but then she continues anyway.

"I really don't know. I wasn't really myself, I was in a bad place, everything kept getting worse and worse - and I'm not saying this as an excuse, but as an explanation."

She turns away from me then and looks out the window, her voice again hollow when she resumes.

"Things were going bad a long time before that. Even before summer.

Sometimes I don't even remember when they were any different. I mean, I didn't feel like everything was all that bad, I did my thing, tried to be who I thought everyone expected me to be: happy, superficial, exuberant Alice with a killer fashion sense and sage advice for everyone. Pretty stupid, huh?"

I don't reply, but I don't think she's really waiting for an answer.

"I guess when Jazz told me what you three had been up to, that should have been a wake-up call for me. Not because my three best friends were fucking each other behind my back, I mean, duh, just the spacial arrangements considered that probably shouldn't have been such a surprise. But it was, because I simply couldn't wrap my head around it, and my only reaction was to lash out, then try to ignore it. I guess on some level I realized that I had lost any connection I had to you and Jazz because I completely withdrew from you, then tried to fit what I had to into my perfect little world."

The fact that she doesn't mention Bella isn't lost on me.

"Anyway, I decided to make the best of it, grow up, turn my life around.

Only that didn't really turn out so well. Nothing fit, and if I hadn't been so afraid of being all alone, I would have told Jazz after a month that it wasn't working. But I couldn't. I tried to change him, and when that didn't work I gave up. Guess I was just waiting for everything to blow up in my face again.

That's why I brought Nate to the Thanksgiving dinner, I knew that there wasn't a chance in hell that could work out. Only then it looked like it really would, so I had to make sure myself that it didn't."

She falls silent, looking everywhere but at me, before finally she catches my gaze. The pain in her eyes is so palpable that I can't even feel angry at what she did anymore.

"But why? We're your friends, you could have told us. And if not me or Jazz, maybe Rose? You know that she would have listened, and maybe made you see reason?"

"There was nothing she could have said that would have changed things for me. I didn't see it all as I see it now, I was so in over my head and so desperate and lost and... see, I can't even explain it now! But one day I woke up and no one in the whole world understood me anymore, didn't know who I was, and at the same time all of you were strangers to me! I didn't know how to deal with that, and things only got worse, so I did the only thing I still could, I tried to hang on to the delusions. But then I met Nate, and with him I was suddenly someone else. It wasn't even sexual attraction at first between us, that came much later. And I hated myself for sleeping with him because I knew I was cheating on Jazz and that he'd never forgive me when he found out, but locked inside my head, it seemed like him shoving me away was exactly what I deserved. I waited and waited for him to catch on, but he just didn't, we went through the motions like before, pretended to be happy, and that drove me insane! He forced me to end things, and I did, about the only mature thing I've done in years."

She is silent for a while, but I can tell from the way her lips keep moving haphazardly that she's trying to find the right words.

"Things between me and him would never have worked out. He should have seen that. Heck, you should have seen that! Friends with benefits who fuck every once in a while when we're both horny and no one else is at hand, sure, but not living together, not being a couple, not trying to build a family and get old together! I kept trying to make him see that but he wouldn't, I did every insane thing I could think of to make him realize that we wouldn't work, but it was as if he had made it the center of his world. He was obsessed with that idea of us, and it killed me every damn day to see him like that.

"For a while I was hoping that Bella would drag him out of it, but for once she didn't act like she had to save him from me. And you, you weren't helping with your moping around and hostility, changing moods so quickly it gave me whiplash when I might have tried to talk to you. I was reaching for the last straw when I tried to find a connection between us again, but I couldn't go on with that, I knew you'd hate me for what I said to Jazz when I broke up with him. Had to, or else he would have found another reason to try to hang on. Do you have any idea how hard it is to repel someone you know loves you and who you, on some level, love back?"

She's crying by then but only glares at me when I start to get up, so I remain sitting and just watch her as she blows her nose and wipes her eyes until she can talk with a shaky voice again.

"I really don't want your sympathy, I did what I did and I won't justify it with any stupid excuses. I got what I deserve, although it was something different than I expected. I got to finally see through all my own bullshit and turn my life around. If getting there cost me my closest friends, I can't change that. I really am so sorry for what I did and what I said, but it's done, and I have to move on. If it helps, I

never had any problems with the choices you made, or your sexuality. I want no part of it, I don't understand it, and I guess because of that, aspects of it repel and frighten me. But I know that both you and Jazz are good guys, and if that's your thing, it can't be that bad.

"I'm happy for you if you think things will work out for you both with Bella, and I wish you all the best. Yes, I'm resentful of your happiness, but you've earned it, and I think that, given enough time and effort on my side, I will either make things work with Nate, or find someone else. I won't ask you to forgive me because I won't believe you if you say you do. I'm not that person anymore, and I would love to get to know who you've grown up to be if you want to see who I really am, but if not, I will learn to live with that, too."

I hadn't expected to hear something like that from her ever, and to honor her honesty I don't say anything, but instead answer her previous question, the weight already lifting from my heart.

"I don't think there's anything in the world you could say or do that would make Bella consider you a friend. You ridiculed her twice in front of everyone, you hurt the two people she cares about the most, and to her way of thinking, you've already fucked up your second chance."

Alice takes that in without showing any emotion, then nods for me to go on.

"Jazz – I really don't know," I sigh. "He's hurt, damaged even, but I think he's healing well and finally got the message you were trying to make him see. I don't know if he could try to be friends with you, or would even want to. I know he doesn't hate you. I think he still loves you."

I try to be as honest in my assessment as possible, even if the words pain me. Not just because of the sympathy I always feel for him, but mostly because I think I would have acted the same way. Somehow it rankles that while there's nothing there between them anymore, he still wants her on some level or another. While she tries to remain indifferent, I see the pain in her eyes, and her tone is dejected when she answers.

"Guess that's more than I could have hoped for. And you?"

That answer is much easier to find, if not exactly easy to give.

"I think I'd like to get to know the new Alice. She reminds me of someone I used to know, but kind of lost contact with over the last few years."

She offers me a weak smile, mirroring my own sentiments perfectly.

"Even if your two plus ones, or is that your plus twos? Whatever, even if they probably disapprove of our association?"

"No one tells me who to see and talk to, and that doesn't change whether I live with one person or two. They'll have to get over it. And I know that eventually they will."

I guess the old Alice would have squeed and hugged me now, but the more sober version of her now leaves it at that sad smile.

"Well then, how about we meet for coffee next week again? And if things work out, I might beg you to look after the cat when I'm in London. I can't really leave him alone and I don't know too many people who I would want to give the keys of the apartment to, either. Your mom already offered but it's nearly an hours' drive for her, and Rose can't really go outside with the baby when it's so cold."

"Sure, just tell me and I'll come over."

"Great. Thanks."

And just like that, we run out of things to talk about. A first for us, but without her constant need to put herself in the limelight, we'll probably need a little time to find a slightly different dynamic in our conversations.

Still, things are more or less comfortable when we hug good-bye – a warm, close body contact hug, not the air kisses she used to give – and I leave her with the cat on the couch and let myself out. In the hallway, just after donning my coat, I notice a picture frame face down on the mantle of the wardrobe. It's the only one left in the whole apartment, another weird thing I've noticed as she had pictures everywhere before. Curious, I pick it up and turn it over. It's a picture of the four of us – me, Bella, Alice and Jazz –

from our vacation together in Mexico. Must have been taken on the last day as I'm badly sunburned with freckles all over my nose, Bella is sporting a killer tan, Alice's hair isn't impeccably styled, and Jazz is still looking vaguely hungover.

I don't know why but I feel compelled to stand it up on the wardrobe, leaving it there like that.

Xxx

The talk with Alice has left me drained, but oddly happy at the same time. I keep mulling over what she said on the way back home, trying to come up with a good explanation as to why I didn't catch on to any of this, but I come up blank. I've been too concerned with my own bullshit to deal with hers, and in the end it doesn't matter as she should have been able to do it on her own, or ask for my help outright.

Seeing that picture in the hallway also made me realize that all of us have been through a journey, each in our own way. Not long after the picture was taken, I fell for Tanya, Bella wavered around until she convinced herself that I would never want her, Alice turned away from all of us because she thought – rightly so – that we were a bunch of immature children, and Jazz dragged along a girl named Brenda. In a way we could have spared ourselves all the years of emotional pain, because a mere six months after that picture was taken we got about to where we are now, minus a lot of experience and a few funny anecdotes, but still.

Somehow that makes me sad at all the wasted time we would never get back, but at the same time it solidifies my conviction that we'll make it work.

And by "we" I mean Bella, Jazz and myself. Whether things with Alice work out or not is out of my

control, and no longer the festering wound that has been plaguing me for months.

All that mulling over old times leaves me in a surprisingly good mood, at least until I get home and can already hear Bella and Jazz before I even reach the door. They are at it again – fighting, and only fighting, as I've had to find out the hard way. For a moment the temptation is strong to just turn around and come back in an hour when hopefully the worst has blown over. Then I can pick up the pieces and try to mend things with sweet words and not-so-sweet fucking, but I force myself to take those last steps and unlock the door.

I don't see them in the living room, but they are loud enough that their voices reach me as they keep shouting at each other.

"How is it possible that you're such an idiot?" Bella accuses Jazz, then interrupts his fleeting attempt at a response. "I mean, you know how he is!

The guy who needed five years and God knows how many pep talks from you to even 'fess up to me that he wanted to fuck me! You can't really expect him to have changed any in the past months!"

Oh great, they're fighting about me. My curiosity piqued, I remain leaning against the entry door, attempting not to make a sound as I strain my ears trying to pick up every word they utter.

Jazz snorts.

"Trust me, it took more like a week and you slinking around in a tiny, white bikini for him to realize that!"

"Glad you're so insightful when it comes to others but not to yourself!" she screams back. "Don't you see that this is not going to just resolve itself? I can see how much you're hurting, and by proxy that's hurting me, too! He won't change, he won't get his head out of his ass, now even less when he's got your cock shoved up there on a regular basis. You need to talk to him!"

"But I can't!" comes the pained yet angry answer.

"Then I will!"

"No! You can't!"

"Says who? You don't really know me if you think I have a problem telling him that -"

"Please don't then! This is my business, not yours. I'm so fed up with you thinking that you're Little Miss Congeniality! You don't know the solution to every fucking problem in the universe!"

That shuts her up, but only for a moment.

"And maybe I'm fucking sick of watching either you or him moping around! I can't remember the last time when we had a whole weekend without any drama or mood swings that we didn't spend fucking from sunup to sundown, and then some!"

"Yeah, maybe that's because the only way you shut up is when you're sucking on someone's cock!"

"You didn't just say that!"

"Yeah, I did, and I can say it again if you don't shut up -"

"You don't get to tell me to shut up! But maybe listening for once in your life would help? But, oh, no, it's so much easier to just wallow in silence and kill everyone else's joy with your brooding, right? The moment he gets home I'm going to tell him. Deal with it!"

Her declaration is underlined by the click of the bedroom door being closed, then opened a moment later as Jazz follows her, both of them coming down the stairs. I know that any second now they will see me, but before I can make up my mind what to do about that, it is too late.

Bella looks furious, as if her tone and words hadn't been a dead giveaway, and all of that rage comes bearing down on me now when she sees me standing just inside the door. Yet instead of getting right in my face she draws it all in, assuming that fragile calm that I've come to fear, as it means that she's totally pissed beyond reason.

"You're late."

The words are precise and bitten off, accusation making her eyes hard and unbidding.

"I am?" I ask lamely, not remembering if we have agreed to me being home after work or not.

"Yes. I called the hospital two hours ago and they told me your shift had ended before noon. And now it's five in the afternoon."

I'm about to make up some excuse, then decide to stick to the truth, but then the meaning of her words hit me.

"You're calling after me? Are you checking up on me or something?"

Try as I might, that comes out as an accusation, and I can see the tension in her rising.

"Do I need to?"

"I didn't think so, but then again I didn't think you would call my work to find out whether I was hiding something from you or not."

She doesn't even look chagrined when she answers.

"I was calling because I wanted to know when you'd be home, to figure out whether or not I should cook something or order take-out and have you pick it up on the way over. Sorry that I'm annoying you so much by trying to be a good girlfriend and providing food for when you come home, starving, as usual, because there are only six supermarkets and ten restaurants in the next three blocks from here!"

Talk about bad timing if there ever was any. My stomach chooses that moment to rumble loudly, and in a bout of insanity I ask, "Well, did you cook?"

"Fuck you!"

As Jazz doesn't join in our 'conversation' I try to defuse it, telling myself that someone has to try to act maturely for once.

"Well, if you need to know, I went over to Alice's."

Bella's eyes narrow upon hearing that.

"You did what?"

"We talked. Just because you start foaming at the mouth whenever someone mentions her doesn't mean I have to break off all contact with her."

For a moment Bella looks as if I had slapped her, and not in a playroom-friendly kind of way, then she rounds on Jazz, screeching as she points her finger at me.

"THIS is exactly what I've been talking about! He'd rather hang out and talk to that fucking cunt instead of either of us! And now he'll have his panties in a twist for weeks because he'll go crawling back to her, begging her to like him again because it's oh, so important to him that she still considers him her friend when she's actually disgusted by him. He'll never get the message! He'll never understand that you -"

"Shut the fuck up," Jazz interrupts her, his voice frighteningly deep and stern. Where screaming hasn't helped, this does, only it just works for him.

Instead of getting in his face she rounds on me, then shoves me in the chest, hard, making me stumble out of her way more from surprise than actual force.

"You're such a fucking asshole!" she shouts at me, then grabs her purse and coat, shoves her shoes on and storms out, slamming the door behind her with a loud bang.

Puzzled by her exit I turn back to Jazz, trying to ask him what that was all about, but find him staring at me with something close to malice on his face.

"You know what, Edward? She's right. You are a fucking asshole."

Chapter 33

For a moment I don't know what I should feel more – pissed off or hurt –

but I find myself mostly confused. It's nothing new for Bella to get in my face like that; I know she deals with her frustration by letting her emotions run rampant, and I prefer that to her brooding and moping around for ages, but this obviously goes beyond any other fight we've had lately. And being left standing in my living room with Jazz, who is seething with anger, while I have absolutely no idea what is going on, is not helping things.

"What the fuck?"

Probably not the most eloquent way to phrase the question, but I don't think anything else will get through to him right now.

Jazz keeps staring at me for several seconds, then grunts, and turns away from me, still tense as hell.

"Nothing. Forget it."

"What do you mean, nothing?" I shout, my own ire rising at the way he's trying to shut me down. "Obviously I'm an oblivious asshole that doesn't

"get" anything. You could at least do me the courtesy of telling me what I was too dense to "get" this time!"

He stops, then looks back at me, flexing his hands as if he is yearning to punch me. Hell, maybe he is. I don't give a shit.

"Well?" I ask again when he still doesn't say anything.

"You really don't see it?" he asks, more incredulous than angry for a moment, but the rage is back within moments. "How can you not see it?"

She saw it weeks ago! Weeks!" Jazz throws his hands up and starts to pace, then stops again, glaring at me. "How can you be so blind?"

"Maybe because I'm just a stupid fucker?" I supply unhelpfully, but his anger is so contagious that I can't calm myself down. I'm so fed up with all the secrecy, and I know it's only going to get worse if I don't stop this now.

"But how about for a change you just tell me what the fuck is going on?"

Instead of whining behind my back that I'm too much of an idiot to get it?"

He takes an almost menacing step towards me, then opens his mouth, but at the last second closes it again. My patience snaps and I cross the distance between us, grabbing the front of his t-shirt to yank

him towards me so I can sneer into his face from up close.

"Fucking tell me!"

"I love you, that's what's going on!"

He spits out the words, then shoves me away, hard enough to make me stumble and for him to shake me off. Once the meaning behind what he has just said registers, I'm stunned, and unable to react. I feel like a fish out of water, and my mind kicks into overdrive.

He loves me. He loves me? What the -

I swallow thickly, then force myself to think; all the while Jazz is staring at me, his shoulders heaving slightly with each shaky breath.

Part of me is waiting for me to freak out – what will happen now? How will Bella take it? Can our relationship survive me fucking up again, in exactly the same way as before? But the only thing I actually feel is relief. Because suddenly it all makes sense.

From the end of their spat it's obvious that Bella knows, in fact has known for a while – and that also explains her erratic behavior of the last few weeks. She's not one to keep secrets, and it must have been eating her up not to breathe a word to me. The fact that she didn't tell me leads me to only one possible conclusion – not only did she bow to what must have been extensive begging on Jasper's side, but she must be sympathizing deeply with him without being upset herself, or else she would have gotten in my face the second she got a whiff of it.

And Jazz's own erratic behavior is clearly related to what just culminated to what must have been one of the hardest things he has ever admitted to anyone in his life. From the way he's still looking at me, with panic and defiance warring in his eyes, it's not hard to guess that he's expecting me to either laugh in his face, tell him to fuck off, or kick him out at any moment now.

I should probably tell him that I don't intend to do any of those things.

Though brief to me, my silence must have been endless to him, and he looks ready to draw his own conclusions from it.

"Aren't you at least going to say something to that?" he gripes, his voice strained, his anger not completely gone.

I spend a fleeting second trying to come up with something, but nothing comes to mind. I just know how his words make me feel.

He hasn't shoved me far enough away that I can't cross the distance between us in two quick steps, but he tries to fight me when I grab his shoulders and pull him close. He seems so fragile as he stares at me, then opens his mouth to keep shouting, but I cut off the escaping sound by mashing my lips against his and pushing my tongue into his mouth.

Jazz shudders, then tries to push me away in earnest, but I only let go of his left shoulder so I can grab the back of his neck to keep him from dislodging my lips from his. The muffled grunt he utters in protest already speaks of his defeat, and a moment later I feel his hands on my body.

The need for any further communication dwindles fast when we start tearing off each other's clothes, in our haste knocking over a chair. I feel the back of my legs get slammed against the side of the couch. Holding onto Jazz, I kick his legs out from under him while I turn us to the side, ending with us falling into the cushions of the sofa with me mostly on top of him. The impact has jarred us both enough to break our kiss, and for a moment we simply stare at each other, panting loudly in the otherwise silent room. Whatever he sees on my face makes him grin for a moment, then he pulls me down and we resume where we left off.

When I finally manage to get my hand into his jeans, I find him already hard, and more than willing to kick off the offending garment. I chuckle as he tears off my pants next, divesting me of them and my boxer briefs with a few jerky motions. We're both needy for contact, kissing and touching each other with rising tension. Before long I rear up and search around for the bottle of lube that must be somewhere underneath the coffee table. After all, the couch has seen more action than our bed lately, no sense in not keeping the necessities at hand.

Jazz grins at me briefly when he sees my hunt has been successful, but when he tries to turn over I just lean into him, pinning him with my weight so that he has to stay on his back. Confusion remains on his face as he watches me squirt lube onto my palm, but he doesn't resist when I grab his cock and stroke it a few times, then nudge his right leg up towards the backrest of the couch so that I can reach his anus and push a wet finger into him. Leaning further into him, I grab his dick with my free hand and claim his mouth again, feeling my own hard cock rub over his lower stomach.

Even though the need to fuck him is screaming inside of me, I take my time working my fingers in and out of him, feeling him relax gradually, then raise his hips to make them push deeper into him. I speed up a bit, then lean back as I watch him succumb to his lust gradually between both of my hands.

Of course, I have jerked him off plenty of times, but this time is different somehow. I love watching him writhe, love listening to the low moans and near growled grunts that he utters before he finally can't hold back anymore and comes with a few spurts over my hand and his stomach.

Following an impulse, I lean over him and lick up his spunk, letting my teeth scrape over his abs on my way back up to his mouth. He chuckles when he tastes himself on my tongue, still a bit breathless from the exertion. I don't intend to let him catch his breath just yet, though.

Moving back until I'm sitting on my haunches, I make a grab for the lube bottle again, but Jazz is surprisingly faster than me, his prepped hand already wrapping around my cock before I can protest. Not that I would, but I'm still a little stunned, and all too happy to thrust a few times into his hand to get myself ready. Then I just can't take it any more and push him back down, and with a decisive thrust I slide my cock into him. The forcefulness of the motion makes him grunt, and my attempt not to smear any lube or jizz remaining on my hands onto the couch ends up with me nearly falling on top of him, the resulting friction delicious.

We end up face to face that way, and I grin down hungrily at him when I start to move, slow, deep thrusts that draw all kinds of sighs and moans from us both. He looks up at me with his eyes wide, his face flushed, then grabs my head and pulls me down far enough so that he can devour my mouth. Throwing all caution concerning altercations due to further ruining the couch deliberately to the wind, I put my hands flat onto the cushions to shift my balance, then pick up the pace, shoving my cock deep into him.

While our movements get more frantic by the minute, the sense of this being more than just any fuck is all encompassing, lending a special quality to the moment – making it intimate somehow. When I finally come it's with a loud shout before I sag down, my forehead against his shoulder, his breathy laugh filling my ears.

We remain lying like that for a while, and once I can move again I turn my head to look at his face, finding him smiling at me in turn. As the sweat slowly dries on my back the realization of the capital mess we've made passes through my mind, but I don't care.

"Are you done staring into space yet? Because I'm starting to get a weird feeling in the hip you're lying on, so if you don't mind, get off me," Jazz huffs, then laughs when instead of moving I just look at him. "What?"

"Nothing," I snort, then pull back a little as I smirk at him, and start to laugh.

"You're such an asshole," he grunts, then punches me in the shoulder, both as payback and to get me to move, but his success is greatly impaired by the fact that he's laughing himself. Shaking my head, I extend my hand to him and draw him to his feet.

We end up standing way closer to each other than we're used to. The moment feels strange and a bit awkward, but Jazz diffuses it by reaching up and drawing my head closer still, brushing his lips almost tentatively against mine. I happily moan into his mouth as I let his tongue snake in, then squeeze his ass almost possessively as he kisses me. He continues to laugh, rubbing his half-hard cock not very subtly against my thigh, and the meaningfulness of the moment dissipates into stupid foolery, leaving us both grinning at each other.

"Come on, let's grab a shower, I think we both need it," I propose. Jazz nods, then looks at the couch and the decorative spots left drying on the fabric.

"She's so going to have our asses for this mess!"

"Oh yes, she will," I agree, then smirk. "Unless we keep her too busy to notice."

He strikes a pensive pose, arms crossed and the fingers of one hand scratching his chin while he looks at the ceiling.

"Could work. If we try hard enough, that is. But let's shower first. I'm starting to feel vaguely gross standing here like this."

We drag our sorry selves upstairs, both too tired to race each other.

Showering is a somewhat industrial undertaking, more cleaning, less groping. After drying off we end up on the bed. I snort when he leaves the usual Bella-sized distance between us, then scoot over until I'm close enough to touch him comfortably if I want to. But for now, we just look into each other's eyes, getting a little lost in the moment.

"I'm sorry if you felt I was deliberately ignoring you," I finally start the talk we need to have eventually. "I really wasn't. I just don't work that way. I don't play games."

He holds my gaze calmly, then sighs.

"I know. I wasn't intentionally acting like a twelve year-old girl."

The surprisingly accurate analogy makes me smirk for a moment, but I try to remain serious.

"For all our sakes, don't do it again. We can talk about anything in or out of the playroom, but I won't play guessing games. When something comes up, you tell me, and we'll deal with it. Okay?"

"Sure," he agrees, then grunts. "Don't know why I was acting so stupid."

Guess I was simply afraid you'd just -"

"Kick you out?" I presume.

"Reject me," he clarifies, his gaze not quite avoiding mine, but also not holding it for more than a few seconds. "I wasn't sure if I was ready to handle that so soon again. That's why I simply wanted to wait. It wasn't like I needed to run to you and tell you the moment I realized it. And it didn't exactly happen from one day to the next, anyway. One day I just knew. And then, out of the blue Bella gets in my face, telling me that I have to talk to you about it, or else. You know how she gets when she sets her mind on an idea."

"Like a hyperactive chihuahua?" I tease.

"To you maybe! To me, more like a Rottweiler, growling and teeth snapping included."

"Not much difference then," I surmise, making him share a sympathetic grin.

"Yeah. It was actually quite funny. There I was sitting, musing over my morning yogurt, and all of a sudden she's all, you need to tell him, you know? Or else you'll drive all of us insane, and then we'll have to burn the couch again."

"Which we might have to, anyway."

"Whatever, you know what she meant. I tried to act as if I didn't understand what she was talking about, but she didn't buy it. And ever since then she's been bugging me to talk to you. Guess I should have listened."

I nod, smiling.

"Rule number one for living with Bella – listen to what she says. She's usually right."

He answers with a noncommittal grunt.

"I just don't understand how she can see stuff like that so clearly, when even I wasn't all that sure what was going on myself."

"Because she's good at reading people. And, to be frank, contrary to both of us, she has the emotional distance needed to keep from acting like a moron."

"Guess so," he agrees, then regards me a little pensively. "Am I ever going to get an answer? Or should I just let your actions speak louder than words?"

"Do you need an answer?"

I feel a little weird turning the discussion to this topic, but judging from the way he's grinning at me, I can tell that he's mostly yanking my chain.

"Not really. I mean, it's just semantics, right?"

"You might want to sound a little more convincing," I tease back, then pull him close for a quick kiss when he looks almost offended. He grunts some kind of unintelligible protest into my mouth, before he slings an arm over my side and shimmies towards me until almost the whole length of our bodies is touching. We continue to touch each other, and explore and kiss already familiar territory with unfamiliar intimacy.

I moan softly when his hand eventually finds my cock and starts stroking me, slowly and languidly. It's not enough to make me hard fast, but enough to tease my arousal from its usual base level. I try to reciprocate but he pushes my hand away with a laugh, forcing me to look for something else to occupy myself with. Only before I find anything, he suddenly stops, looking a little guilty.

"You should call Bella. I think she was genuinely pissed, not just frustrated with us both for not doing what she thought we should."

I pointedly look down at where his hand is still wrapped around my semi erect cock, but of course he's right. I presume she took off to visit one of our friends, or my mother if she was really mad, but things could go downhill fast if I leave her locked in that state of mind for too long. And while I think that I haven't done anything wrong, she will still blame me for having let things slide for too long.

"I will. But you might want to consider finishing what you've started first?"

"Not sure I should," he grinned. "That would just lead to more and more, and then it'll be past midnight and she'll castrate us both for leaving her worrying for nothing for so long – not sure getting you off now is worth that."

Sighing theatrically I accept defeat, then get up and walk downstairs to retrieve my cell phone from my discarded pants. I have one missed text, from Bella, telling me in very few words – three to be precise – that she is at Rose's. The stupid guy part of me considers just replying in kind, but after the 'did you cook' remark, 'come home now' might not be the best idea. Plus, from the lack of dishes on or around the stove I can tell that she hasn't, anyway. I'm not that stupid.

Walking over to the window front to peer outside, I hit speed dial. Bella picks up on the fourth ring, and I wonder if she's had her cell out waiting to hear from me.

"Hey," I greet her, a bit cautiously. I hate having to talk to her on the phone when things are a little strained between us; I prefer to be able to read her body language.

"Hey," she echoes my words, sounding neutral, which in her case means she's very likely still pissed.

"Do you know when you'll be home? I miss you."

She pauses, then I hear her exhale slowly.

"Did you talk?"

"Yeah."

"Did he tell you?"

"Yeah." My reply comes out sounding a little dejected, something I don't really feel. Her answering silence is strained, and I let my forehead touch the cool glass, trying to come up with something witty to say. "We might have to get a new couch soon."

"Huh?" she asks, obviously surprised at what she must guess is a weird change of topic.

"Because there's lube and jizz all over it."

Now a completely different kind of silence follows, and I can tell she must be smiling although she tries to sound gruff.

"Seriously? Can't you ever make it up into the bedroom? The sheets are so much easier to change!"

"Guilty as charged. I jumped him. You can spank me for having been such a bad boy. I think it's mostly my jizz anyway."

Bella gives a brief bark of laughter.

"Oh, no, I won't, you actually have to be on your best behavior for me to indulge your need to be spanked!"

"Too bad, you do it so well."

"Smart-ass."

"Always," I grin, then look out into the night. "Come home now, please?"

"Sure. Shall I bring pizza? I can grab it on the way over."

"I'll get it, you just get home, 'kay?"

"How can you be so needy after what I presume amounted to you fucking the living shit out of Jazz, pun intended?"

"Because I'm a glutton! And it's been weeks since we just watched a movie together, the three of us, without anyone having their panties in a twist over something."

"What do you know about the state of my panties?" she huffs, but before I can answer, she goes on. "Scratch that. Rose is tired anyway. I should let her sleep. Extra pineapple for me, please."

"Sure thing. Love ya."

"You, too," she replies, then hangs up.

The sound of one of the floorboards creaking tells me that I'm no longer alone, but I wait for Jazz to come closer before I turn around and look at him. He's trying so hard to appear neutral but his expression screams that if not upset, he's at least slightly miffed, but that just makes me grin.

Holding his gaze I walk over to him, then pull him close, hating that he has already donned a t-shirt and sweat pants as I would have preferred to feel his skin on mine.

Looking deeply into his eyes I lean in until our foreheads almost touch, then utter the few words he so valiantly insisted he doesn't need to hear, but obviously wants to.

"Love you, too."

To take some of the sappiness out of the sentiment, I reach for his ass and squeeze it briefly, making him snort before he steals a quick kiss.

"So, what was this about pizza? I'm starving!"

Snorting, I scroll through the directory on my phone, then call the Italian restaurant around the corner and place the order. Ten minutes later I make my way into the cold night, returning to our building just as Bella comes walking down the street from the other direction. I wait at the door for her, trying for an easy grin, but from her knowing smile I gather that I probably still look somewhat guilty. I don't like fighting with her, and prefer that her screaming at me always ends with hot, equally angry make-up sex, not hours spent apart.

I'm a little surprised when she doesn't leave it at a quick peck on my mouth but deepens her kiss to a real one, tongue and all. She even has a coy smile for me when she pulls back to unlock the door.

"What? Never heard of conditioning? Gotta reward you on the rare occasion that you get your head out of your ass."

I huff, then follow her inside, the stack of pizza cartons in my arms sadly keeping me from slapping her ass as I really want to right now.

"How's Rose?" I ask instead as we wait for the elevator.

"She's good. She was bitching for fifteen minutes that she needs a haircut.

You know how Rose is, when she has nothing else to complain about other than her looks, it means everything is perfect. The baby's starting to get really active, and I don't think Rose will get any respite just because she's sleeping for longer intervals now."

"Probably not."

"I'm so glad we don't have one. Yet, I mean."

"Yet?" I can't keep a grin off my face. As usual, Bella scowls, but then shrugs.

"Who knows what I'll think about that in a few years? If I can see two thickheaded mules like you and Jazz see reason with a single temper tantrum, I'm sure I can get you to change diapers at 3:00 am, too. I should remember that tactic, it might prove useful in the years to come."

"Bella?"

"Yup?" She pops the 'p' succinctly, her smile already darkening with anticipation.

"Now you're the one who deserves that spanking."

"Tease! Like that will keep me from anything."

"I could leave it at just a spanking, you know."

She huffs, then holds the door open for me upstairs so I can bring the pizzas inside.

"Theoretically, I guess you could. Practically? Never. And that's one of the reasons I gladly suffer all your stubbornness and stupidity."

Taking the cartons from me after having ditched her outer layer of clothes, she makes her way over to the couch, briefly scowling at the spots before she shakes her head in exasperation. Jazz joins her, armed with three bottles of beer and a stack of napkins, and I quickly follow.

Together, we curl up on the couch, Bella wedged between Jazz and me, eating pizza right out of the box and drinking beer straight from the bottle, as it should be. Sometimes, the simplest things in life are still the best.

Chapter 34

"Do you really think this is a good idea? We could just do it in a week or so instead. Or next month. No need to rush it, right?"

I sigh, fighting hard to control the smile that threatens to spread across my face.

"Jazz, calm down. If you don't want to play, then we won't."

"It's not that I don't want to," he offers, then shrugs. "But, you know, my brief venture into topping hasn't worked out all that well, with the whole lack of observation thing. Maybe it's still too soon?"

"Only one way to find out, right? But right now it's not your lack of awareness that's a problem, but more the fact that you show as much confidence as a slug."

"Hey, who says that slugs can't be confident?"

"I do," I reply, and when that makes him pause I simply raise one eyebrow.

He grunts, then grumbles something under his breath about cocky bastards.

"Look, there's no need to fret. I'll be there the whole time, a silent observer you can depend on, should you need me. But for what it's worth, I think you're ready."

He smiles at me gratefully, then takes a last, deep breath.

"Okay, then let's do this! I mean, what can go wrong? Chances are five to one that I'll be the one to safeword, not her!"

I wisely hold my tongue, then follow him across the hall and into the playroom.

It's slightly weird being reduced to a spectator in my own playroom, but it makes sense to do Jazz's first scene as a Dom here, with Bella, not me.

We've talked at length about what he can do, what he has to keep in mind, and what signals he needs to respond to, should they occur – I really think he is ready. Bella thinks we're both full of shit and should have done this months ago already. Which is another reason why I think she deserves to be on the receiving end of a few errant flogger hits. She has been asking for it – literally and figuratively.

Jazz has opted to play wearing a pair of low-slung jeans, even though I've told him that his choice of dress should be the least of his concerns.

Appearing confident is what is essential, and the way he's walking in a slow circle around Bella – who is of course kneeling in position on the floor –

reminds me more of a half-drunken swagger. Not quite the kind of confidence he'll need, but there's

still hope.

He takes his time, letting her stew for a while as he stops behind her and just looks down at where her hands are clasped behind her head. It's obvious to me that, of the two of them, she will be the last to lose her calm, but then she has learned to be remarkably patient over these last months while he can barely kneel for five minutes without fidgeting.

"Get up," he eventually orders. I feel a little proud at how calm and commanding he sounds, even though his fingers still drum against the side of his leg. Bella rises to her feet, then stills again, waiting.

"Hands behind your back, fingers clasped as if you are praying." His directions are clear, and she complies immediately, then jerks once when a flaying rope end hits her thigh accidentally as he starts tying her wrists together. An almost apologetic look appears on his face; he doesn't say anything, but I take a mental note. It's good that he notices. After the scene is over, he can be sorry for it all he wants, but as long as he's playing, he's in charge, and the sub has to trust that everything that happens, happens for a reason – and not because the newbie Dom still has problems judging what a few feet of hemp will do if tugged the wrong way.

Once Jazz is done I watch as Bella flexes her fingers, then tugs on the restraints to test them. They seem to hold well, yet aren't too tight. Instead of going right on to the next step, Jazz remains standing behind her, then steps up close enough that her fingers idly brush against his crotch.

Leaning further into her he inhales loudly next to her left ear, then blows on the side of her neck, making her shudder ever so slightly. He grabs her breasts and roughly digs his fingers into her tits for a moment, then lets go just as he steps away. He's giving her a quick taste of what is to come, but deprives her of any further stimulation.

Jazz leaves her standing there and walks over to the toy rack, selecting one of the medium-heavy leather floggers. We've done enough target practice with pillows over the last few days that I'm confident he will do a good job with it. And if not, that will at least wipe the slightly cocky smile off Bella's face that she has been beaming at his back while it has been turned on her.

Before he even raises the flogger to hit her, he walks around her again, letting the leather strands of the toy slide over her ass and thigh, increasing her anticipation. When he is sure that he has her full attention he steps back, grabs the ends of the flogger strands, aims, and lets them fly. His aim isn't perfect, but it's not bad, either, hitting her ass every time without accidentally straying to her thighs or lower back. Bella doesn't react except to curl her fingers upwards, away from where the flogger comes in contact with her skin and to suffer in silence.

He continues like that for a while, the strokes slowly increasing in both speed and force. He is highly focused on the task, missing the way Bella keeps looking at the ceiling instead of at him or herself in the mirrors. At least she does it stealthily, and stops whenever Jazz re-directs his attention to another region of her body. When he puts the flogger down again, her ass and thighs are a nice light shade of red.

Taking her arm in a light but firm grasp, he walks her across the room to the padded bench and pushes her down until she's lying firmly on her back, her ass at the lower edge and her weight on her arms. I'm not sure whether I should tell him to have her sit up and replace the rope with cuffs, but decide against it – I haven't checked the ties, and she should be fine this way for a while. I also trust her to speak up if she starts losing the circulation in her fingers. Another note on my imaginary list.

"Raise your legs and spread them. Let me see your cunt."

Displaying her first real sign of defiance, she only complies after he nudges her thigh, and even after that her body remains tense. When her head lolls to the side I can see her face in the reflection of the mirrored wall, and realize that she's fighting hard to keep her tongue. Jazz doesn't notice –

again – and runs his fingers over the inside of her thighs, then stops briefly to run two fingers up and down her pussy lips.

"Soaking wet already. You really must have liked the flogging," he observes.

Bella's head comes up, a hard move considering the strain it puts on her neck and shoulder muscles, and huffs at him.

"No shit. Did they teach you that in Dom Sunday School?"

Instead of putting her in her place – a hard slap to the pussy might have been a good choice, or sneering into her face to wipe the bratty pout off it an even better one – he grins, then walks off to the supplies cabinet. The moment his back is turned, Bella closes her legs and shimmies around so that she can let them fall somewhat comfortably to the side while she keeps her knees drawn towards her chest.

Jazz is a little perplexed to find her like that, looking innocently up at him with a sweet smile on her face. I can't remember her ever doing that with me. He finally gets the message, but instead of barking at her, he steps between her legs and pries them open, leaning on her thighs with increasing pressure until she grunts. That can't feel good on her hips, but at least it's one way to stress the need for her to keep her position.

"Legs stay open until I tell you to close them, understand?"

I half expect her to shrug, but she keeps on smiling and offers a sweet,

"Yes, Sir," in reply. He smiles back, obviously happy when she complies, and I feel like smacking my forehead.

"Good. Let's see if we can get that cunt of yours dripping for real."

Bella is more amused than anything by his words, but holds her tongue while she watches him turn on the vibrator he took from the cabinet. He runs it over her clit a few times before he pushes it into her pussy, fucking her slowly with it. She relaxes a little, then lets out a few moans a porn star would have been proud of. And if I'm not mistaken, it's suppressed mirth that has her legs shaking a while

later.

"You like that, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir, I like it," she replies, laughter now also in her voice. Jazz looks a little irritated, then pushes the vibrator deeper into her.

"That better stay in until I come back."

I half expect her to answer with a succinct, "Or what?", but she leaves it at a meek, if fake smile. At least he doesn't ask for her permission or anything like that. When he returns with the bottle of lube, he pushes one, then two of his fingers into her ass while he keeps the vibrator firmly in her pussy.

Eventually he deems her prepped enough, and after applying lube to the vibrator, slides it slowly into her ass. Bella holds her breath, her body language changing from languid to expectant for a moment, but it soon switches back when all he does with the vibe is make a few, very slow thrusts. I'm all for teasing her, mercilessly even, but right now he's only boring her.

"Let's spice this up a little, shall we?" he says, and this time she doesn't hold back.

"Yes, please, let's."

Jazz frowns, then looks over at me, which draws a long and quite audible sigh from Bella. I only shrug, silently telling him to go on. I feel like my part here is done anyway; the lesson he needs to learn is the one Bella is teaching him right now.

He looks a little unsure as he walks back to the toys, but then straightens and grabs the box of clothespins with more confidence. After pushing the vibrator back into her ass, he starts applying the clothespins to her body –

thighs and breasts mostly, a few more on her labia, but none on her nipples.

The sound of the vibrator hitting the floor makes him whip his head around, then he gloats as she looks up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

"Didn't I tell you to keep that in?"

"No, you didn't. Only that I should keep it in my pussy. You didn't say anything about my ass."

He looks ready to argue but then shakes his head slightly, picking up the toy and leaving it near the door to take with us for proper cleaning when we're done. Instead he gets a medium-sized butt plug, and after lubing it up, shoves it into Bella's ass with enough determination to drive home the message. He even keeps on fucking her with it for half a minute before he leaves it in, then adds another push against the base for emphasis. It's funny to observe how she immediately slips into a more docile state when he acts the part, but I wonder how long that will work. The clothespins won't really hurt her, and he seems a little reluctant as he picks up a long, narrow paddle.

The first two slaps he deals to her soft, inner thighs look promising. The resulting cracking sound is loud and underscores her nearly inaudible pants. But then he accidentally hits one of the clothespins, snapping it clean off her skin. Bella utters a high pitched whine, nothing serious but a sound of clear pain. Jazz immediately checks the slightly red mark on her skin, then strokes her cheek in a soothing motion – and that is definitely not what she wants; only her reaction is one neither of us expects.

Her laughter is rich and deep as it bubbles out of her, rocking her whole body. Several clothespins fall off her thighs when she closes her legs and draws her knees towards her chest again, adding a light hiss to her laughter, but doing nothing to stop it.

And as if that isn't bad enough, he keeps hovering by her head, trying to talk some sense into her. It's then that I decide I have to do something.

"Jazz, got a minute?" I bark, maybe a little too forcefully, but it makes both him and Bella look at me, and shuts her up. She even looks a little guarded as she relaxes again when Jazz walks over to where I'm standing, looking a little like a hurt puppy.

"I'm totally fucking this up, aren't I?" he mutters, thankfully too low for her to hear what he's saying.

I sigh inwardly, then sling one arm over his shoulder and turn us both around so that Bella can't see our faces as I whisper to him.

"Quite frankly, yeah, but that's not a surprise. Your first scene, a sub who loves to yank your chain every chance she gets outside of the playroom, of course that's not an ideal setup. Plus she's never been one to be patient and meek, and it's her first time with a Dom who doesn't know how to mentally pull her under within the first minute."

He nods a few times during my little speech, but doesn't look happy.

"So, what do I do now?"

"First off, stop being the overprotective best friend. In here she's your sub.

Her sole purpose is to please you and to take whatever you deal out. Little accidents happen, like with the rope, but you don't react to them during the scene if it's nothing serious. For all she knows, you could have done it deliberately to test her keeping her position."

He inclines his head. "Good."

"Next, you can't let her talk back. Your whole behavior towards her is too lenient, too playful. She's pushing your boundaries, and you're giving up territory inch by inch, so of course she's going to continue that behavior.

Tell her to cut the crap, and don't offer empty threats. Be stern, and if the need arises, treat any transgressions harshly. She can take it, in fact she's asking for that right now. Manhandle her, be rough, not caring and gentle.

There's plenty of time for that after the scene. You can cuddle up with her and bring her hot chocolate and massage the cramps out of her aching shoulders later, but as long as we're here, you show no mercy."

"I'm not sure I can do that," he admits.

"Because she's a woman?"

"Because she's Bella. Sorry."

I sigh, scratching the back of my head.

"Then you have to keep her from getting the idea that she can push you.

Keep her occupied, give her mind something to work on besides finding the chinks in your armor. Challenge her. Hurt her."

"I'm not sure I can-"

"She's a masochist, you do her a favor every time you slap her a little too hard!" I grunt, probably loud enough for her to hear it, but Jazz's whining is getting on my nerves. Turning away from him I walk over to Bella, forcing my face to remain neutral while I let her see by my gaze how displeased I am with her behavior. Even before I reach her she's cringing a little, and looking somewhat guilty.

I lean over her, my hands propped up left and right of her face, and for a few seconds I just leer down at her. She seems to be trying to sink deeper into the padding of the bench but holds my gaze steadily.

"Do you even know why you're behaving like such a brat today?"

I don't have to growl to make her swallow hard, and she shakes her head almost immediately. I wonder for a moment if she's lying, but she doesn't look like she is. Mostly to give Jazz a good example of how ridiculously he is coddling her I grab her nipples and twist them hard while I pull upwards, my fingers digging deep into the pierced flesh. Bella immediately tries to arch her back in an attempt to lessen the strain, a pained moan leaving her that rises into the higher registers when I squeeze even harder.

"I really don't know, I'm sorry, I just can't help myself! He's not doing anything to me and looks ready to apologize, I can't not rub that in his face!

Please!"

I'm not sure she really knows what she's pleading for – while her face is contorted with pain I don't think she actually wants me to stop – but I figure that's beside the point. Still keeping up the pressure on her nipples, I lean back down and kiss her, stopping her up. Then I move on to her ear, and pretend to kiss her again while I whisper softly to her.

"It's because he shows the dominant behavior of a doormat. Keep pushing if you're willing to handle

what you'll get when he snaps."

Then I let go and return to Jazz, smirking at him but doing it so Bella can't see.

"Now she's wet, trust me. She's really getting off on that."

I know that he understands that, but there's a huge difference between being aware of a fact and acting on it. Changing my tone so my voice is a little less belligerent, I give him a few more pointers.

"Get her off the table, remove the remaining pins, and tie her breasts like I showed you last week. Then add more pins, but use the plastic ones on her labia. The bondage will make her tits more sensitive, and adding the pins then will be more intense. Then use the paddle, and get a little creative. Hit her calves, the soles of her feet, the underside of her breasts. After the pins have been on for a while, they will pinch the flesh enough so that hitting them lightly will hurt – play with that. Let time work for you; the longer you draw things out, the more removing the pins will hurt. Slap them off with the paddle, that should make her scream and writhe nicely. If you're up to it, do it while you fuck her, she squeezes so nicely when she's in pain. Tan her ass good if she comes without permission, though. If talking isn't your thing, then don't do it, it's not a role-play scene."

Jazz looks ready to bolt for a moment, but then exhales slowly.

"She's here to please me and take whatever I want her to suffer through."

"Exactly. Now go and give her a wild ride. She deserves it."

I take my place in the back again while Jazz seems to consider his next step, probably a little overwhelmed by my info dump. He shouldn't be, as we've talked about this at length, and all the possible ways the plan could be modified along the way. Then he squares his shoulders and walks back to her, his whole manner changing bit by bit as he comes closer.

There is no hesitating this time when he grabs her arm and hauls her back to her feet. Keeping his hand tightly around her bicep, he pulls the clothespins off her tits and lets them fall to the floor.

"Don't move," he barks, then undoes the knots holding her wrists tied behind her back. I catch a look at her hands while he gets the cuffs. The skin is red but not bad enough to intervene and tell him not to have her lie on them again. He forgoes the breast bondage, but that's his call to make.

Yet instead of just substituting the previous ties, he now cuffs her hands in front of her body, pushes her down on the bench again and brings her arms up to clip the cuffs to a snap hook at the other end of the piece of furniture.

With her ass still at the lower edge, she is forced to stretch her body to resume her previous position.

"Legs open. Don't close them again."

I'm a little proud that he leaves it at a simple command, without adding a pointless threat that might just provoke her to see if he will really act on it if she doesn't obey. She's still hesitant to comply and

he lets it slide, but gets the other box of clothespins, the plastic ones. Bella goes still when he starts putting them on her labia first, pinching the puffy, swollen flesh around and between her piercings. He also uses them on her tits, forming neat circles around the edge of each of her aureoles, the last two pins on her nipples make her whimper. Lastly, he adds a few more on her arms, but not on her thighs, which makes me curious.

Once he's done he steps away and admires his work a little, before he picks up the paddle again. Holding it in front of her eyes first, he brushes it almost tenderly over each of her cheeks, then down between her tits until he reaches her pussy. I'm a little surprised when he taps it twice against the pins on her labia, but the shudder she gives in response looks good.

Still standing beside her, he proceeds to slap her spread thighs with the paddle, fast and almost methodically. At first she takes each hit in stride, but before long her legs start to tremble with the strain of fighting her instinct to close them and hide away from the pain.

"Keep them open," he tells her, almost conversationally, never missing a single slap. She doesn't reply - no witty comment nor meek acknowledgement - but compared to before that's an improvement.

By the time he finally stops, her thighs are a uniform red color, and she grunts loudly when he adds a few slaps with his bare hand. None of that should have been really painful, but considering it went on for a few minutes and there was no added pleasure, it has done a good job wearing her down a little. And this time Jazz's expression is evil when he grins down at her.

Still holding the paddle in one hand, he walks up to where her hands are tied. He unzips his jeans and shoves them down his legs, then takes his partially erect cock in his hand and slaps it playfully against her hands.

"Make me hard."

Another simple command, and one that would normally be easy for her to obey, but with the way her arms are already stretched out and the cuffs fixed to the bench, she has a hard time even rotating her wrists, let alone jerking him off. He watches her feeble attempts for a little while, then laughs softly.

"Seems like you need some incentive to do a good job."

Leaning forward, he taps the paddle against the upright clothespins on her breast from the side, slowly increasing the strength with which leather hits plastic. It's not hard enough to knock the pins off but certainly enough to make her feel it, and I hear her gasp when he switches to her other breast.

He keeps alternating between them, then uses the paddle in between her tits, rapidly slapping the pins on the inside of both of them.

"I'm not distracting you too much, am I?" he asks, his voice deliciously sarcastic.

Eventually Bella manages to get him hard enough for his liking, and I wonder how much harder that must have been compared to if it had been me. I would have gotten a hard-on from hurting her alone, but if I'm not completely mistaken, Jazz has been working against her the whole time like this. Bella's

certainly worked up by the time he changes his position to standing beside her so that he can take her head and shove his cock into her mouth. She rises to the challenge with alacrity, and for a while he just enjoys the way she bobs her head vigorously up and down on his cock, his head thrown back and his eyes closed.

"Stop!"

She halts immediately, her lips sealed halfway down his dick, and looks a little perplexed when he just steps away from her, his wet, hard cock moving up and down with each of his steps. He eyes the clothespins on her pussy curiously, then walks back to the storage cabinet – and returns with a roll of duct tape.

Bella tries to raise her head and watch what he's doing, but the way she had to move her head for the blow job has strained her muscles too much for now. She gives up when she feels him tug on the pins experimentally, then moans softly when he pulls all the pins on one labia towards her thigh and starts running the tape around her leg and over the pins, fixing them in place there. When the tape holds he does the same with her other leg, leaving her labia spread wide and her pussy open and vulnerable. My cock definitely approves of that setup.

Jazz experimentally flicks her clit, making her jerk briefly, then pant from the pain the motion has caused.

"Oh, I like that," he observes conversationally, then goes to fetch another vibrator. Bella moans when he switches it on and holds it to her clit briefly, then hisses and nearly bucks off the bench when he presses it against all of the clothespins on her right pussy lip.

It's fascinating that he obviously has no problem watching her in pain, even pain he has caused directly, if it's not a vicious kind of pain but rather circumstantial. I wonder for a moment how he justifies it to himself, but as long as he somehow does, I don't really care.

Eventually he seems to grow tired of it, and with a grin still on his face tells Bella to open her mouth. Switching the vibrator off, he slides it between her lips, then leaves it there. He runs his cock up and down between her spread labia, teasing her like that for a while, before he shoves himself deep inside her, making her buck against him in turn. Taking her ankles, he pulls them back to his ass, signaling her to close her legs around him, before he picks up fucking her, hard, fast and deep.

Bella is just about to relax into the motion when he reaches towards her tits and starts to pluck the clothespins off, making her scream around her improvised vibrator gag when the blood comes rushing back into the pinched-off flesh. Soon only the last two pins on her nipples are left, and from the way her eyes widen with trepidation, I can tell that she's dreading their removal.

Jazz stops, his cock deep inside her, then grabs the vibe from between her teeth and brings it to her clit, switching it on again. Bella pants in turn, her fists clenching at the direct pleasurable assault. He keeps watching her face without moving until she finally starts to beg.

"Please, Sir, may I come?"

"So soon already?" he taunts, then resumes fucking her, making her pant hard while she fights to remain in control of herself.

"Yes! Please!"

"No."

Her teeth clench and her nails dig into her palms, the way she's trying to hold back stunningly erotic.

"Please, let me come, Sir, I beg you, please! I can't hold it much longer!"

Jazz snorts, then shoves the vibe back into her mouth without switching it off this time.

"That's not exactly my problem, is it?"

She tries to talk around the gag but is unable to get a single word out. After watching her tremble for another ten seconds, Jazz reaches for the two remaining clothespins, taking one in each hand and pulling softly, making her keen in return.

"I will count down from five, then remove them. Only after that are you allowed to come."

Bella nods frantically, her eyes open and fixed on him, then on the pins when he pulls harder on them and starts to count, while at the same time increasing the speed of his thrusts into her.

Then the clothespins come off, and Bella nearly pushes off the table, the back of her shoulders and her ass the only parts of her body still on the bench as she comes with a high-pitched scream. Holding onto her hips the whole time, Jazz keeps fucking her, his own orgasm following when the worst of hers is over. For a moment he sags down on her, his lips kissing the red marks on the soft flesh of her tit, before he pushes away and crouches down between her now slack legs to remove the duct tape.

Spent as she is, Bella whimpers a few times while he unwinds the tape, the noises laced with pain when he has to pull harder to unstick it from the clothespins. Finally the tape is gone and he starts taking the pins off, slowly, one after the other. She jerks a few times but takes the pain mostly in silence, then relaxes further when he rubs her clit with one thumb while massaging her reddened labia with the other hand.

When Jazz is done he straightens, then walks back to her head, unclipping the cuffs from the bench but leaving her wrists still restrained.

"Lick your juices off my cock."

She complies quickly, her motions a little sluggish but with no hesitation in them anymore.

"Now kiss it to thank me."

Again she doesn't hesitate, doesn't question, but still scrunches her nose up when she lets her head fall back onto the bench. Jazz laughs softly, then leans down to kiss her gently on the mouth before he

unbuckles the cuffs and helps her off the table. Bella's legs are still a little shaky as they both come walking over to where I straighten up from my crouch on the floor.

"Better now?" Jazz asks, cocking one eyebrow dramatically.

"Don't ask me, ask her," I retort, grinning at them both.

"Well, you certainly had a few problems at the beginning, but I can't complain about the end."

Jazz beams at her words, as if they were that much of a surprise. I nod in agreement, then look pointedly at Bella's ass.

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Nope, I figured you'd take care of it and relieve what must be, without a doubt, an uncomfortable hard-on," Jazz replies sagely, then hugs Bella before he walks out of the room, leaving us alone.

Bella looks after him with confusion plain on her face, before she turns to me.

"What was that all about?"

"I think he's trying to give us some privacy," I venture a guess.

"What for? It's not like him to walk out on watching us fuck."

I shrug.

"I think he expects us to do more than just fuck."

It's funny to watch her cross her arms over her chest in a clearly defensive gesture, but the way she looks me is hungry, not weary.

"And do you plan on doing that?"

"You know me, I only ever think with my cock, any way you make me come will do."

She huffs, then steps closer to me so she can kiss me, molding her naked body against mine. Very quickly my clothes are gone and we end up on the floor, me on my back and Bella straddling me, her beautiful breasts, all covered with fading marks, right in front of my face.

I sigh contently as she guides my cock into her pussy, feeling the butt plug rub against me as she sinks down. While I'm horny as fuck I still love letting her take the lead, starting to move on me before she takes my hands and brings them to her tits.

"But be nice to them, my nipples still hurt like fuck."

"They do?" I tease, then grab her hips for a moment so that I can rearrange myself into a position that

allows me to reach her breasts with my mouth instead. "Guess I'll have to do something about that."

"You should," she moans as my hungry mouth finds her left nipple, her hands holding my head in place as I start sucking and nibbling on the pierced flesh. I'm so happy her nipples are finally completely healed so that I can lick them again, much to her ongoing amusement. Today she doesn't tease me about it, though, but instead arches her back in an attempt to urge me on as she presses her tits into my face.

"Yeah, like that!" she grunts as my hand finds her other nipple, deftly pinching the already tormented flesh. "May I rub my clit?"

I'm a little surprised that she asks, seeing as we're obviously not playing, but I don't mind, of course.

"No," I tell her succinctly, then grin up at her when she looks disappointed.

"But you may pinch it. I want to listen to you moan in pain."

Her eyes glaze over a little as she nods, then slips one hand in between our bodies. The angle is a little awkward, though, and after a minute or two she stops moving.

"Do you mind fucking my ass instead?"

"Of course not."

She has the plug out before I can even withdraw my cock, and when I try to push her away so I can grab the lube, she simply takes my dick and pulls it back to her anus, then eases herself down on it.

"There's more than enough lubrication, Jazz got very enthusiastic about it,"

she laughs, then dutifully brings her fingers back to her clit. "Shall we go on?"

Instead of answering I thrust upwards into her, then bite down on her nipple while I dig the fingers of my other hand into her aching breast. She clenches hard around me in turn, letting me hear the moan rising up from her, loud and clear.

It doesn't take long until I'm close, and when I feel her bear down on me as her own orgasm makes her body shake, I let go, finishing with my cock buried deep inside her.

"That was fun," Bella pants when I help her off me, and we leave the playroom together. I can always clean up on my own later, but right now I want to rub myself all over her ass in the shower.

We find Jazz still in the bathroom, and he looks perplexed that we're done so soon. Bella laughs at his astonishment as she draws me along into the shower.

"Not all scenes take two hours or longer, and I don't mind still being able to walk out of the playroom without needing additional support. You did a good job, no need to get my kink on any further."

It's still early in the day when we're done cleaning ourselves, barely noon, so we don't head for the bed afterwards but downstairs. Bella excuses herself; she has some research to do, or so she says. That leaves Jazz and me to talk about the scene.

"Better?" he asks, unnecessarily.

"Lots. You did a good job there finding a balance between her needs and your comfort zone."

"It's still kind of weird to play with her," he admits. "And not just because it's her, but because her expectations are kind of, well, intimidating."

I sigh, for a moment wondering how often I will have to explain this part to him.

"Jazz, her expectations as a submissive are simple – she wants you to dominate her, to assume, be, and stay in control of her. That's all. You don't have to cater to all her needs, you don't have to max her out until she's close to using her safeword, she just wants not to be in charge, and to not have to think. It's not your responsibility to do anything that makes you uncomfortable just because you want to indulge her."

"I know. You've told me that often enough."

"Then why do I have to tell you again?"

He shrugs, but doesn't answer.

"Do you think I'm a hypocrite for having problems being rough with her when I don't have the same issues with you?"

No idea why, but his question cracks me up.

"Uhm, why should I? At least you're honest about that, so no harm done, no deluding anyone, right?"

"Yeah, but doesn't that make you feel like I, well, don't know, discriminate too much between the two of you?"

"And why should that be a bad thing?" I want to know, then grab his head and pull him close for a quick yet passionate kiss. "You discriminate between us on other levels, too, and I so don't mind."

"True," he huffs, but while I can tell that it was the right answer from me, I think he needs a little more convincing still.

"Look at it like this – Bella can get her kink on with me, too, and we both enjoy that a lot. But whenever we switch, it's mostly her indulging my needs. I know that she likes it once in a while, but she doesn't need it, and I wouldn't ask it of her more often. Now with you in the picture, she doesn't have to do it unless she wants to, and she does enjoy playing with you on both sides of the equation. Otherwise you wouldn't have had her begging like that. You did a good job once you got your groove on, and you both had fun. That's what counts."

Jazz is a little pensive after that.

"You know, it's kind of strange. I don't want to hurt her, but I like to make her react and writhe like that, which I only manage to do when I hurt her.

Still feels hypocritical to me."

I sigh, shaking my head.

"Then you're a lost cause, and the endless guilt will eat you up! Will my bending you over the back of the couch and fucking you long and hard help ease the emotional pain weighing down your soul?"

"And there I thought we were having a real conversation!" he proclaims dramatically, then leans back and regards me levelly. "Although I wouldn't mind bending you over the back of the couch."

"No wrecking the couch or I won't cook for a week!" Bella interjects from across the room, not even looking up from her laptop.

"That's a serious threat! Not fair!" Jazz complains, then sobers up again, turning back to me. "But I really liked the way she started to respond to me when I picked up the pace a little. That look in her eyes, the way she was begging for it even when she couldn't do so with her mouth."

"Now we're talking," I laugh, amused when he sneers in return.

"I told you before, I'm not into it for the pain, I like the whole power exchange thing way more. Even if it scares the crap out of me, taking all that responsibility and all."

"Which just proves that you're the right guy for the job. Don't worry, it gets easier with time, and a hell of a lot more rewarding."

"I think I'll just take your word on that," he remarks dryly, then leans closer so that his breath tickles the side of my neck. "Still, as it is right now, I prefer not to be the one who calls all the shots. But maybe if the next time it's you kneeling on the floor, looking up at me with pleading eyes while I fuck your throat, I think I could get used to it faster."

"Tease."

He laughs until I silence him with my tongue, plunging it into his mouth.

Still, I have to admit, I really like the idea myself. It certainly beats playing watchdog all the time.

Chapter 35

The sound of moaning in my ears.

Sweat covering my whole body.

The telltale slap of flesh against flesh loud throughout the room.

A wet cunt gripping my cock and a hard dick shoving into my ass.

My definition of heaven. Nothing beats coming, wedged between the two people I love the most in this world.

Jazz laughs softly in my ear as he grips my shoulder, slumping against me while I do my best not to collapse on Bella. Her eyes flutter open slowly when she feels me pull out, and her lips draw back from where her teeth dig into the gag in what I presume is a grin. Leaning down I place a peck on her nose, then laugh when Jazz slaps my ass playfully.

"I think I'll leave you two love birds alone now, I really need a shower!" he exclaims, and before I can say anything in reply, he's gone.

"Smartass," I grumble, then can't hold back a chuckle as I turn to Bella. "He only does that so I'm stuck with cleaning up! Don't you think?"

She raises one sweaty eyebrow but doesn't say anything, letting her silence speak for itself. Considering she couldn't have said much in the first place with the gag still firmly lodged between her teeth, too large to make even basic vocalization possible, that's probably a good move.

I shake my head and call him a lazy dog under my breath, while I set to the task of divesting Bella of the rope that has her tied into a neat, helpless human parcel. When I finally remove the gag from her mouth, she works her jaw slowly and opens and closes her mouth a few times before she makes a face, not quite able to shake off the discomfort yet.

"It's not like you'd accept any help," she points out, stretching her muscles with a few moves that instantly make me want to bend her over the bench a third time. "Last week you spent half an hour complaining about how the spreader bars belonged in the other cabinet, how he had folded the rope the wrong way, forgotten to bring one of the rope coils back for washing, and put one of the canes in with the crops, and that's not even a comprehensive list. There's a reason we wisely leave you to do your own cleanup, then suffer in silence when you mope about having to do it all by yourself."

I snort, but can't deny she has a point. Still I round on her, then grab her head and kiss her roughly, feeling her body mold itself against my own.

Moving back, I keep holding her like that, staring deep into her eyes.

"Just when do you ever suffer anything in silence?"

As intended, that makes her crack up, and she keeps grinning at me even when I let go of her again.

"Like you don't get off on my grunts and moans and screams!"

"Of course I do. That's the whole point of making you grunt and moan and scream."

"And here I thought you were just indulging my needs," she huffs good-naturedly, then watches as I continue to fold the ropes – the right way, of course.

"You know, I've been thinking," she starts, then waits until I look at her before she goes on. "Jazz will be away for a day next week. Maybe we could plan something fun to do while he's gone?"

"Define fun?" I ask, more to humor her than anything, as I know I probably won't get to see her at all between Wednesday and Saturday because of my forty-hour shift.

"Well, you know, the kind that leaves me banged up and unable to walk?"

I flash her a grin, because how could I not? But at the same time I feel a wave of regret already seeping through my gut.

"I'd love to, but -"

"Before you go raining on my parade, I should probably tell you that I've been on a sneaky mission for the past week, tracking down your colleagues and sweet-talking them into trading shifts with you. I didn't even have to lie much when I told them about our upcoming anniversary, and how I might have planned something, and how it's only possible to do it between Thursday and Sunday next week."

I don't know why I'm even surprised to hear that. Ever since she stopped being the shy, polite little trophy wife that Mike wanted her to be, she has turned into a persuasive force of nature that no one is able to withstand, or say 'no' to. I still offer her a stern look, but she only grins back.

"White lies, really," she adds. "It's April, just three weeks until we do actually have that anniversary, you know? And while I think we should celebrate that with Jazz, I'd really love to have some alone time with you again, too."

Getting the cleaning utensils from the corner next to the door, I set to wiping down the bench while I think of something to say in return. Bella seems to take my momentary silence as chagrin, because she crosses her arms over her rope-marked breasts, looking just a tad bit defiant.

"It's not like I wouldn't speak up if I felt the need to have you to myself more often. I was talking mostly playroom time. Watching you both have your first real lover's spat last week was just too adorable to keep you apart for too long at a time!"

Gnashing my teeth, I glare at her before I kneel down to clean sweat, snot, spit and other bodily fluids off the floor.

"If you keep making fun of me like that, I will have to tan your ass one way or another. And, as I keep repeating, he was behaving like an ass. Should I have kept silent?"

"I'm not making fun of you alone, Edward, but of both of you! And speaking of my ass, you know that I love including Jazz in and out of the playroom, but even you have to admit that you tone it down a lot for his sake. Not complaining, and I'm happy that it's been weeks since you last weirded him out enough to make him consider walking out, but I'm kind of starting to miss how things were between us before we were both getting it up the ass all the time."

Finally done, I straighten, then walk over to her and kiss her softly.

"So you've miraculously cleared our schedule for the time that Jazz isn't here. Knowing you, you must have more plans for what we should be up to then."

I don't even ask her if I should have initiated a few more intense sessions with just the two of us, because I know that if she had felt the need for it before, she would have asked for it.

The fact that she's biting her lip before she answers is already making me curious, and her following suggestion even more.

"I kind of thought that it might be interesting for once to not stop playing when we leave the playroom? Like a continuous, day-long session?"

"I thought you didn't want to do anything even remotely 24/7-ish?"

"I didn't until now," she replies, then looks down at my chest while her fingers dance over my abs. "And I know that you haven't been too fond of the idea in the past, but I think the way things are going between us, we might have reached a point where we know each other well enough that we can anticipate each other's reactions? And somehow I get the feeling that having me at your mercy for twenty-four hours, completely devout and set to fulfill your every wish, might be something you'd like."

I can't help returning her coy smile with a sinister one.

"You might just be right about that."

Either my voice or my words – or maybe both – make her shiver for a moment, turning that coy smile into a wide, hungry grin.

"Thought so. You know that I love it when you're all playful with me and Jazz both, but the thought of having you go all mean, sadistic, relentless bastard on me just makes me all kinds of crazy."

"And what exactly do you have in mind? Or is this as far as your planning goes, and the rest is up to me?"

"Actually, yeah, the rest *is* up to you, but I might have a few suggestions that I hope will inspire you."

"Like?"

"Well, the usual," she starts, then takes a deep breath in what I know is her way of making herself go on, even though whatever she wants to say clearly takes some strength to admit. "I'd also like to point out that since Jazz moved in we haven't done any fisting at all, which is very, very sad. I also know that you've been eyeing that single tail whip over there a lot, but you've never asked me if I wanted to try it. And because this is a special occasion, I think I'd love it if you left a few marks on me. Souvenirs, kind of.

Nothing permanent, but enough that they'll take a few days to fade. I mean, it will be kind of inevitable anyway if you hit me as hard and as often as I want you to, so might as well go all the way with it, right?"

Instead of answering verbally right away, I kiss her, deeply and hungrily, making her both moan and laugh at the same time.

"I'd love to. Anything else?"

"Nope, just be your charming self and give me hell."

Chuckling darkly, I reach around to pinch her ass, making her jump and yelp delightfully.

"I think I can do that."

Together we leave the playroom, and my mind is already filling with devious ideas while Bella takes care of my resulting hard-on in the shower.

As such things go, the next few days fly by so fast that I'm hard pressed to plan and organize everything I need to enact my plan in its glorious entirety. It takes Jazz about five minutes to catch on to the fact that I'm up to something, but I don't tell him anything beyond the basic setup – that while he's in California, trying to do a week's work in just a day, I'm going to do my very best to turn Bella's life upside down. He doesn't even bat an eyelash although he must realize that we're going to do a lot of things he's probably still uneasy about but we established a while ago that as far as things in the playroom are concerned, a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy works for us. I even get the sense that he's glad we're going to use the opportunity presenting itself, which makes me wonder if he feels like we've been holding back for his sake alone. Which, while not entirely wrong, is a long shot from the truth, but there's only so much mindfucking I can do with Bella when we're limited to an hour or two in the playroom. I think that if our day goes even remotely as I plan, I might have to turn that into a monthly thing, as none of us seem even remotely put off by the idea.

When I leave the hospital late on Wednesday evening I'm already excited, doing my best to ignore the gentle abuse of my co-worker's teasing. For some reason, everyone seems incredibly amused that my girlfriend has such a tight grip on my reins that she even bends all of them and the usually rigid shift rotations to her will. I'm more than happy to leave them blissfully ignorant of what will be going on in our home, and outside of it, during the days to come, but it's impossible for me to hide my excitement.

And I'm not the only one, I realize when I come home and find Bella restless and jumpy, unable to sit still even while she watches Jazz pack his overnight bag. She greets me with a bright grin and some very emphatic kissing, which would have turned into more than just a make-out session if Jazz hadn't thrown us out of the bedroom, so as not to destroy his previous efforts at ironing his shirts and pants. I'm still tempted to fuck her right outside on the landing of the stairs, but she drags me downstairs to help her cook instead.

Spending the evening in front of the TV watching a movie is an endeavor we give up ten minutes after starting the DVD, as Bella and I are both horny as hell. Jazz doesn't seem up to the task of keeping us apart or tearing each other's clothes off, nor does he seem even remotely inclined to try. He also doesn't protest when Bella and I unanimously concentrate most of our attention on him – we have the next day all to ourselves, we might as well make Jazz feel like he's going to be missed while he's away, whether that's the case or not.

I'm already too locked in a dominant mindset to let him set the pace, and as usual, Bella is nearly as driven as I am before she's ready to give up control. We end up with both of us pretty much doing whatever we want to with Jazz. Afterwards, all of us are dead tired and utterly satisfied by the time we finally fall asleep, with Bella curled up between us as usual.

I still rouse a few times that night with a hard-on, but keep myself from waking Bella to take care of it, seeing as she'll be doing that and nothing else soon. By the time Jazz has to get up I feel ready to jump both of them anyway, but instead I follow Jazz into the shower and jerk him off while he makes fun of my perpetual horniness. Sadly, we don't have enough time that I can bend him over the sink and fuck that smirk right out of him, but one can't have everything, right?

Before I drive Jazz to the airport, I crawl back onto the bed until I'm hunched over Bella who is still dozing groggily, nudging my nose against the side of her neck until I hear her breath hitch. It's a clear sign she's awake, but still pretending to be asleep. Grinning deviously I kiss her shoulder, then whisper in her ear; I can't see her face as it's still buried in the pillow, but I don't really need to.

"The moment I'm back from dropping Jazz off, the game's on. I expect to find you kneeling in the living room, naked and ready for me. And, by default, for the next day you're not allowed to look at me or speak to me unless I give you permission first or ask you something. Any hint of defiance on your side will be punished swiftly and harshly, so you better be on your best behavior as my obedient slave."

Even though she still keeps up the sleeping act I feel her body tense underneath me, and I chuckle softly when she pushes her ass back against me so that it is rubbing my crotch through the thick duvet.

"There's a list in the night stand with a few more things I've come up with that I would love to include. Check off what you're okay with, strike through what you're not. If you forget or are too lazy for that, I will take that as your silent submission and do it all anyway. Consider this your last choice until Friday morning whether you look at it or not."

I kiss her shoulder lovingly before I crawl back off the bed, getting a low, contented hum in return from her. I don't really expect her to balk at any of my ideas, but three of them are still on her list of

soft limits although I think she's outgrown her hesitancy to try. I'm curious whether she will protest – or leave the list untouched and herself none the wiser about what I have in store for her. As her safewords are still active whatever we do, I'm not concerned about pushing her that one step too far – she'll let me know if I need to back off, or if she's ready to take the plunge.

Kissing Jazz good-bye at the airport leaves me strangely melancholic, even though I know that he will be back again in thirty hours. Yet the thought of what is to come soon has me in a good mood. On the way home I pick up fresh bagels and muffins for breakfast – or whenever we'll actually get to eat them.

As expected, I find Bella kneeling on the living room floor upon my return, but she's not as relaxed as I'm used to from the playroom. Her usual air of serenity is replaced by a certain jumpiness, and I see her twitch at least twice in the minute I take to just stand by the door and watch her. She doesn't turn her head in my direction, doesn't even look up from the spot on the floor in front of her spread knees. She's following my directions to the letter – but I can't say that I feel the satisfaction or rush I expected to, and she doesn't appear to, either.

Just to screw with her before we get to any actual fucking, I take my time undressing, then flop down on the couch in only my underwear and t-shirt to watch the morning news. Being ignored like that must be driving her crazy, and I deliberately build on that when I idly push my hand into my boxers and start to stroke my cock. I'm hard in no time, and the knowledge that she must be watching me stealthily is only adding to it, but I still don't feel the thrill I've been anticipating for days.

Getting tired of my own games quickly, I lose my patience and walk over to where she is still kneeling, head down and hands behind her back, but not even when she sucks me off at my command does my irritation fade. While she tries hard to do her best – which her being her, on her knees and all that, isn't that hard to accomplish – it just isn't what I yearn for, which I have to admit to myself when I come down the back of her throat.

Because I'm pensive, and quite frankly a little lost in my own thoughts, I keep my cock there a little too long until she starts to gag, and it's only then that I realize what is missing. As close as this is to what most people probably think of as the perfect scene, it just isn't us. And if I've learned anything since hooking up with Bella, it is the fact that just because everyone sees something as good doesn't mean it's right for us.

A week of planning is suddenly turned upside-down. I decide to take a little time to re-evaluate, so I leave Bella kneeling where she is and go upstairs.

In passing I check the nightstand, and not surprisingly find my notes untouched. The fact that she wants to be unaware just plays into my hands, and I head back into the playroom to make sure I have everything in stock for my new, impromptu plan.

I can't really change all that much about what I've organized for tonight, but until then I can do with her whatever I want – and the fact that I don't have to adhere to my own script is weirdly liberating. Before I go downstairs again I pause, still a little uncertain about whether she'll appreciate the change

or not. I remember all too clearly that it was her express wish to submit to me completely today, but she can still do that later – and it's not like I will leave her much choice but to bow to my will, one way or another, before we go out to dinner.

My cock is particularly pleased by the new ideas forming in my head, but I do my best to will away my hard-on as I can't use it right now. Donning a faded pair of jeans I quickly rifle through Bella's closet, coming up with some old cotton panties and bra I haven't seen on her except for when we've neglected to do the laundry, and an old sundress she has set aside to donate to Goodwill.

The fact that she doesn't even frown when I drop the clothes in front of her a minute later is a testament to her commitment to be the perfect sub today, but it does weird me out a little more about my initial plan. This just isn't us. As much as I want to be the one to make her scream at the top of her lungs, this meekness is simply unnerving.

"Dress."

She gets up quickly and puts on the clothes without question, with not a single look in my direction, then sinks back onto her knees, waiting. I watch her for a full minute, itching to jump into action and trying to find a reason to scold her, but of course there is none. She's the image of total submissiveness today, and the more I watch her, the more it grates on my nerves.

Being the first to break, I walk around her and crouch down at her back, then grab her breast and dig my fingers into it while I push my other hand into her panties. She's wet already but not as drenched as I want her to be before we start, confirming that just like me, this isn't really pushing all her buttons the way it would if this really was our perfect scene. Leaning in I lick along the side of her neck, then gently bite into her ear lobe before I whisper to her, grinning at the light shiver I feel running through her body.

"You are such a good girl today, but that's utterly boring. I think I need a change of plan."

I'm strangely happy to get my first real reaction out of her when I hear her breath hitch and feel her spine straighten, but her lack of a verbal acknowledgement prompts me to bite down on her shoulder.

"You'll have time enough to be my meek little slave later when you're too exhausted to put up a fight anymore, but not right now."

Even without being able to see her face I can tell that she's conflicted – she knows I'm not above making her mess up deliberately so I have a good enough reason to punish her, but my words must sound as tantalizing to her as they are to me – now it's up to her to decide how to act. While she takes her time with that I switch my grip on her tit, and when I pinch her nipple hard, her cry seems to drag her out of her indecision.

"I thought you wanted me all docile."

No appellation, no nothing. If this were a trap I'd have ample opportunity to make her life hell, but as it is, I don't really give a shit right now.

"And now I don't. Is that a problem?"

She shakes her head, then whimpers when I increase the pressure of my fingers on her nipple.

"How do you want me to react in turn?"

"Like your usual charming self. As defiant as you think you can take the ramifications."

At that she pauses for a moment.

"Any reason I'm wearing these clothes? Other than so you can tear them off me again, I mean. And, as you didn't bring me any shoes, I'm guessing we're going to stay inside?"

"I was thinking about the old hostage / kidnapper scenario. I'm too lazy to carry you back through the building where people might see us and call the police, but assume yourself snatched up and dragged back to my lair."

Bella gives a contented hum that makes me smirk, so I add, "If you want to, you can struggle for real, but if you don't hold back, I won't, either."

I expect her to answer me, but she catches me completely by surprise when she suddenly rams her elbow into my stomach, then pushes up onto her feet. She's already scrambling away from me while my mind is still reeling from the slight but real pain from her jab, and the fact that I'm no longer groping her. Because she has been kneeling for so long it still takes her too much time to get to her feet and put some distance between us. I will freely admit that the fact that she even got a blind swing at me brings out my vengeful side. Instead of trying to catch her, I hurl myself at her with my full weight, pinning her under me as the impact drives the air out of her lungs with a loud 'oof'.

"Do you really think you can get away from me?" I snarl in her ear, but again she's too quick for me to keep her down. A little bit of struggling and we end up with her half on her back, her legs trapped by mine, glaring up at me while she punches my biceps hard.

"Let me go!"

"Not a chance," I laugh, then grunt when her next punch hits my ribs again.

I finally manage to restrain her arms by grabbing her wrists, but because I have to stretch to do so, she manages to draw one of her knees to her chest and in between us. I'm again surprised by her strength and how much of a real fight she puts up, but then I don't really have anything to compare this to. The only other time she's ever had a chance to struggle was when we were in the woods with Jazz, and I still vividly remember how reluctant she had been to do anything then. Not so today, it seems, for when I finally have her flat on her back again she starts to scream for help, forcing me to let go of her wrists so I can clap my hand over her mouth and shut her up.

More struggling ensues and I'm sure I'll bear a few bruises from that tomorrow. Eventually I manage to securely press her against me, her arms immobilized between us, while my hand still covers her mouth. At least she doesn't try to bite, but dragging her upstairs still proves to be a hard, slow

process.

When I'm finally inside the playroom, I'm confronted with another problem I haven't anticipated – with her struggling to break free I can hardly tie her up with rope, or use the padded leather cuffs. I barely manage to fling the door to the supplies cabinet open without letting her escape, but once I scan all of the items inside, an idea starts to form in my mind. I have to actively push her down with my whole weight to be able to slap the handcuffs onto her wrists, but if anything, she fights harder once her arms are secured behind her back.

I let her tear herself free then so that I can root through my stuff to hunt down the only thing I can come up with that might work. In the meantime, she flees across the room, panting heavily when she finally stops and leans against the mirrored wall in the opposite corner of the room.

I stuff a coil of rope into the waistband of my jeans and grab a bunch of black cable binders in my hand before I finally go after her, doing my best to leer at her. She seems torn between open defiance and badly hidden but superbly played fear.

"Why are you doing this?" she shouts, trying to make a dive to my right but only ending up slammed against the wall with her back towards me. I let a dark chuckle be my only answer as I swap the cuffs for a cable binder after some more struggling. Her legs are far harder to restrain, but eventually I manage to lock them together at her ankles and below and above the knees, the black plastic biting into her flushed skin. She tries to break free one last time and I have to lunge forward to catch her properly, cursing under my breath. I should have planned to do something like this together with Jazz, both for practicality and safety reasons, but as I'm on my own, I'll have to make do somehow.

With her now facing me, I grab her chin and dig my fingers into her cheeks until she lets out a small sound, my eyes boring into hers. I love the defiance in her look, at least until she manages to spit at me and actually aims true. My mind wants to shut down my motions when I let go of her so I can slap her – not hard, but enough to sting – yet the fire in her eyes doesn't dim in the least, and I know I can continue like with this.

Holding her chin again, I lean into her until I have her pinned with my lower body while I force her to keep looking at me.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stop fighting now."

She doesn't answer, only tries to jerk her head out of my grasp but when I don't let go she leaves it at a mute glare. Bella tries to fight again when I step away and grab her upper arm, but she is mostly helpless and has to suffer me picking her up and carrying her through the room. She thankfully doesn't struggle when I leave her leaning against my body and stretch up and grab the rope hanging from the ceiling, but I pause right there. I don't want to strain her shoulders much yet, so instead of tying her elbows together and fixing the rope to that, I turn her around and start to fondle her breasts.

Bella does her best to appear put off by my groping, even more so when I manage to tear the front of the dress apart so I can drag her bra down and completely expose her tits. Her angry whimpers when I roll her nipples between my fingers make my cock hard again, as does her body wriggling against

my own, but I don't waste much time with groping her.

Her struggling ceases a bit when I get the rope out of my waistband and start to wind it around the base of her breast double-stranded, but she nearly falls down when I have to leave her for a moment to get yet more rope to do the same with her other tit. I love how the rope does a great job at making her tits stick out obscenely, the effect only increased when I tie the two ropes together and then to the one suspended from the ceiling so that I can force her onto the balls of her feet with a simple pull on the suspension rope.

Tying that off at the winch on the wall, I watch her try to keep her balance, but with three cable binders around her legs that's no small feat. The pain resulting from the pressure on her breasts must be substantial when she finally loses her footing for a few moments, but I let her tire herself out a bit before I step in to steady her. Her gaze is a little wild when she looks at me again, but it's nothing she can't bear. I leave it at a somewhat evil smirk before I grab her already ruined dress and continue to tear it apart until the front is completely open, the tatters sliding down to her elbows. Her panties are much harder to destroy, and I give up on her bra, cutting it off with the safety scissors I always keep handy for emergency reasons. On second thought I do the same with the remainder of the dress, too.

She doesn't look particularly happy when I return to her after putting the scissors away. For a moment I even think that she has already given up, but when she spits in my general direction I know that the game's still on.

Smirking at her, I close the distance between us. Then I slap her left cheek a little harder than before, leaving a quickly fading handprint there while her motion to avoid the hit unbalances her anew. This time I steady her by grabbing her nipples and twisting them, making her yowl with pain until she moves closer to me to alleviate the pressure.

"Still so defiant? I think I have to teach you a lesson," I taunt, then let go of her to walk over to the impact toy rack. New excitement zips through me as my fingertips brush over the leather of the single tail whip that I've had for two years now, but haven't yet gotten a chance to use on Bella. The leather warms quickly under my hand when I grab it and let it unfurl in all its beauty.

Bella looks fittingly uneasy when I return to her and caress her thigh idly with the whip. I'm burning to let her feel its sting finally, but instead of going for that right away I push the whip over her head from behind and lay it across the ropes binding her tits.

"That better not fall down or I'll make sure you'll regret it."

She doesn't reply but I can still see her tense with the effort to keep still and brace herself for what's to come. When I slap her ass hard she yelps and tries to take a step forward, nearly losing her precarious balance. Another slap and the same happens again. I take pity on her then, putting one hand on her stomach while I continue to bring the other down hard on her ass for a quick warm-up. She squirms and grunts, trying to minimize the contact from both of my hands which of course is impossible, and only ends up making me use more force.

Because I'm not that much of a heartless bastard, I ease up on her for a moment so I can slide my hand

lower, from her stomach to her cunt. Now she's wet for real, and although her ties make it impossible for me to reach down far enough to slide a finger into her, I can still rub her clit. She relaxes briefly and my next slap on her ass finds her unprepared, making her cry out beautifully.

I keep spanking her a little longer while I tease her clit with my finger, then step back and retrieve the whip. Sadly her fidgeting hasn't dislodged it but I don't really care that much – I don't need an excuse to use it on her after all.

Taking a stance in front of her, I let my eyes roam over her body before I raise the whip. I know that she isn't just pretending to be scared of it – and rightly so. Unlike most of our toys, whips can actually do real damage with any accidental hit that misses its target. It has taken me years to perfect throwing whips. Beth has been a good teacher, making sure I knew what I was doing before she ever let me near anyone with it. I've only had a week to pick up my practice again so I won't over do it, for both Bella's sake and my own, but I intend to give her a wild ride.

Some people like to crack their whips before they actually make skin contact, but I refrain from that, simply because I can't stand the sound myself. Instead I throw it with minimal velocity, just fast enough to hit my target – the side of Bella's thigh – square on. She makes a sound somewhere between a grunt and a cry, but it's clearly more pent-up tension needing release than pain. If there even is a resulting thin red line it disappears before I can see it, and when the next few hits don't hurt her further, Bella slowly relaxes.

I let my aim wander to the front of her thighs, then up to the soft, lower part of her belly below her abdominal muscles, then walk around her so I can reach her ass, the back of her thighs and her calves, always keeping a steady rhythm and the resulting pain to a minimum. She still doesn't relax altogether, and a few times I have to stop because she loses her balance.

Eventually I grow tired of that.

Substituting padded cuffs for the wrist cable binders is easy now that she can't really fight. After I've raised her arms away from her back and clipped them to the connective rope above where the ropes from the breast bondage lead, I cut through the cable ties on her ankles and below her knees. I leave the last one so that she can't kick at me, though, and once she stops fidgeting I pick the whip back up again.

One of the crucial rules when using whips is to stay away from any joints and most importantly the face, but because it's her first time altogether I take it easy on her in general. Her ass and thighs bear the brunt of it over the next minutes as I slowly increase the speed of my throws, soon leaving marks that don't fade faster than they appear. The will to fight leaves her gradually as her mind slips into the sensation, soon craving the pain as much as I know she dreads it. The low moans I pick up from her are a sure indication of that.

Things get a little more interesting when I switch to the front of her body, and this time include her bound breasts. Her breath catches harshly at the first contact while she instinctively turns her head to the side, farther away from anywhere the whip might go. Each time I hit her tits she jerks in her bonds, a few whimpers escaping her now and then.

When I take a break her shoulders sag with relief, but only until I walk up to her and grab her bound tits roughly, pushing my fingers into the constricted flesh. Bella grits her teeth and tries not to make a sound, but soon rewards me with a strangled cry when I don't ease up. Keeping my right hand there I let go of her other breast, leaning forward so I can take her nipple between my teeth. She hisses sharply when I bite down hard, then moans as I continue sucking while I tease the barbell of her piercing with my tongue. Meanwhile, I stroke her side with my free hand, then push two fingers between her still tightly bound legs so I can stroke her clit. Before long she is having problems trying not to writhe under the attention, and I know it's time to step up the pace.

The glazed over look of lust quickly leaves her face when the whip kisses her stomach again, faster and more painful than before. I love how both surprise and the harsh sting of the toy make her cry out, her voice that high kind of hoarse I've heard so little of over the last months. And as I go on, sometimes straying to her thighs but mostly aiming at her tits and stomach, her cries become louder and more frequent. Her squirming soon forces me to abandon her front lest I hurt her accidentally. After all, her upper back and ass are much more forgiving when it comes to not quite perfect aim.

"Please stop! I can't take it anymore, please!"

I'm surprised to hear her begging like that, but it fits the tone we've set.

Pausing, I then add two final, more painful throws before I walk around to her front, staring at her bound tits before I meet her eyes.

"Did you say something? All that lusty moaning from you is kind of distracting."

She frowns for a second but quickly returns to pleading with me when I slap her tits hard.

"Please! I'll do whatever you want of me, just please stop!"

Stepping close to her until her tits rub against my t-shirt, I reach around her and pinch her ass, then push my finger down her crack until it reaches her anus. She makes a face but keeps her eyes on mine, wide and seemingly afraid.

"And what keeps me from simply taking what I want?" I ask her, pushing the first digit of my middle finger inside her sphincter. She seems at a loss for words, even when I stop and step away from her. When she still doesn't answer I slap her face again, loving the quick flash of anger that appears in her eyes before she tries to appear meek again.

"Nothing, but things will be easier if I comply, right?"

"I can just force you to comply. I don't need your cooperation, slut."

I slap her again, hard enough this time to make her wince, and she suddenly drops the act. Even though she can barely move she somehow manages to grip the ropes her cuffs are fixed to with her fingers, allowing her to brace herself a bit before she starts to yank on her bonds. She tries to wriggle out of them, and when that doesn't help, kicks out towards me somehow, all the while shouting at me.

"You fucking bastard, I demand that you let me go!"

Stepping out of her reach I watch her with a wry grin, inwardly wincing at how much the ropes must be digging into her tits, but she has had enough experience with bondage to have expected that before she started throwing that fit.

"Not before I'm done with you," I tell her succinctly, when her own thrashing has worn her out enough to stop for a moment. I love how angry my words make her.

"Let me go!"

I simply shake my head, then pick up the whip again.

"Seems like I need to teach you some manners," I grunt, then crack the whip after all in the general direction of her back. It falls short by several inches but the sound scares her into momentary submission again.

Her back is soon covered in red lines, and when she stops fidgeting every so often I turn my aim lower, to her ass. Every whip lash makes her howl now, and a few of the marks turn into slightly raised welts, bound to stay for a few hours at least. A few more obscenities leave her but then she falls oddly silent, my signal to stop.

Leaving the whip by the wall I walk back to face her, the tear stains on her cheeks confirming my guess that I've pretty much maxed her out. There's still defiance in her gaze but she seems to want to shy away from me when I close the distance between us.

Reaching for her throat, I keep her from turning her head away, the light pressure of my fingers barely enough to choke her, but either way making a point. She doesn't react when I press my lips to hers, but a quick, hard pinch of her ass makes her cry out and eliminates that problem. I shut her up by shoving my tongue into her mouth. Either she's tired of pretending not to care, or too far gone to keep on playing, as she kisses me back eagerly. A few whimpers escape her when I continue to knead her butt, then cut off when I increase the pressure of my fingers on her throat.

When I pull back she lets out a strained panting sound, so I let go of her, and instead stroke her cheek softly for a moment, a tender gesture that I turn on her when I grab her hair and wrench her head back until she is forced to look into my face again.

"You will not defy me. You will do as I say. Understand?"

Stubborn as always, she keeps her lips pressed together until I slap her again, only then offering a whimpered, "Yes!"

I reach up and start undoing the knots that hold all of the ties together.

Bella sighs with relief when the strain on her breasts lessens once there's some slack in the ropes, but grits her teeth until I'm done unwinding the ropes completely. The marks the rope has left on her tits stand out even against her flushed skin and I'm quite happy to maul her tits while they are still

sensitive from being bound for so long. She suffers it mostly in silence, not fighting me, and lets me lead her towards the bench at the back of the room, once I've cut through the cable binder holding her legs together.

I push her down on her back so that her ass hangs slightly over the edge of the padded bench, then tell her to stay there with her knees drawn up to her chest. She complies and I turn around to fetch the needed supplies, watching her from the corner of my eye gingerly rub her tits once my back is towards her.

Returning with padded cuffs for her ankles and enough rope to immobilize her, I set to the task of doing just that. She still doesn't protest although she's not as compliant as I'm used to. This forces me to push and pull her into position rather than to just fix the wrist cuffs to the head end of the bench directly, followed by the ankle ones with barely enough connective rope to leave her with a minimum of movement in her legs.

I love how open and vulnerable she is for me now, leaving me so many possibilities to use and abuse her while she can't even move her head properly with her arms right and left of it. She shivers slightly when I skim my fingers over a stray welt left on her thigh, then opens her mouth as if to protest.

"I don't think so," I inform her, then turn around to fetch the remnants of her panties. Bella lets out a grunt of protest when I force the torn cotton between her teeth to gag her. Turning my attention back to her thighs, I stroke the mostly unmarred expanse of flesh before I return to the supplies cabinet.

Bella tries to get a look at what I bring back, but she doesn't react when she sees the bottle of lube and inflatable butt plug. Slickening the plug quickly, I then work it into her, her ass not needing much preparation to accommodate the toy in its native state. A few pumps expand the plug and draw a low moan from her and I keep going until she winces briefly. Gently pulling on the base of the plug shows me that she won't be able to just push it out anymore. I leave her one last time to get the cane we most often use in the playroom.

Used to it as she is, she doesn't look too concerned when she sees me return with it, but that quickly changes after the first few strokes that come down hard on her spread thighs. The whipping and the strain on her legs from the previous position she was in have left her muscles tired and somewhat tender, something I abuse now mercilessly. She has also asked me for marks, and I'm only happy to oblige – whether she wants it now or not.

The makeshift gag does little to muffle her cries. After a little while she doesn't even seem to hold back anymore, sounds of pain and pleasure intermingling freely, depending on where I hit her rather than how hard, it seems. I only pause from time to time to add a few more pumps to the plug.

She's squirming around as much as the position allows her, and before long my jeans are definitely too tight for my own comfort. It feels good to ditch them together with the t-shirt, both sweat-soaked already from all the exertion. Bella uses the break to relax again, her eyes closed, so she misses the tray of lit candles that I bring back to her side – and once they are on the floor she can't see them because of her position.

I keep on caning her thighs and ass for a while longer, both to keep her agitated and to give the candles time to melt enough wax to make things interesting. A couple of minutes later I put the cane on the floor next to the bench and grab a tall, white pillar candle. Without much ado, I upend the entire pool of wax over Bella's left thigh, letting it run from below her knee to inches away from her pussy.

The wail she lets out is almost painful in my ears, even muffled as it is, and the gag does little to silence her heavy panting once she stops. Her eyes are huge as she stares at me, but it's obvious that her reaction is more due to surprise than pain. I chuckle and pick up another candle, doing the same to her other thigh, this time only getting rewarded with a low grunt. We've played with wax before but usually in smaller amounts, with lots of teasing and little actual spilled wax – not so this time as she soon finds out. I get two blue candles next and upend one over each of her tits, making her arch her back in discomfort.

Exchanging the candles for the cane again, I set to the wonderful task of peeling the cooled wax off her thighs and tits with the help of the flexible rattan and maybe a little more force than necessary. More moaning and grunting ensues, and she rewards me with another scream when I add another round of wax – this time directly onto her swollen, wet pussy. The cane won't do there so I use the flat of my hand, slapping her pussy long after the last bits of green wax are gone, leaving only glistening, red flesh.

A check on the plug reveals that it has deflated considerably from her bearing down on it so hard, something I have to remedy fast. Once the plug is back to its largest circumference I grab the base and start to move it inside of her, even though there's little give at first. Eventually it deflates a little more while her muscles gradually relax. When a light pull allows the thickest part to pop out of her sphincter, I'm pleasantly surprised by how much she can take.

Crouching down between her legs I get a better grip on the plug's base, then ease it into her before I pull it back out. She slowly relaxes further as I keep going, even when I increase the diameter of the plug again with a few pumps. A loud moan leaves her when I lick languidly over her clit, then start tonguing it in turn with fucking her ass with the plug.

Before long I have her writhing underneath me again, this time not from pain, although I'm sure that the dark lines the whip and cane have left on her ass and thighs must still hurt. I can tell that she's close to coming soon, but I don't stop when I feel her legs go rigid. She orgasms soon after that, huffing and groaning into the gag, followed by a yelp when I pull the plug out completely and drop it on the floor.

Armed with a generous amount of lube on my fingers, I push three of them into her ass, quickly adding a fourth when I feel that she can take it without needing any further stretching. Her eyes look up at me but I'm not sure she's really able to focus on me anymore, and I resume fucking her while stroking her clit with two fingers now.

While I would love to get my whole fist inside of her, it's obvious that I will need to spend a lot more time stretching her. As it is, I'm rather happy with how much she seems to enjoy the added attention today. Yet eventually my own need grows too strong and I stop, then lube up my cock before I thrust into her ass, my fingers continuing to rub her clit. Relaxed as she is I don't need to waste any time going slow now, and the closer she gets to climaxing again, the tighter her ass grips my cock.

"Don't fucking come before me!" I tell her seconds before I can't hold back anymore. She follows moments later, bearing down hard on my cock that is now buried deep inside of her ass. Slumping onto her, I keep my head pressed against her breast for a moment before I pinch her nipple, then pull back, leaving her spread on the bench with my come slowly leaking out of her ass.

Even after my own ragged breathing has leveled out I can hear her panting loudly, and she has that blissed out, high smile on her face that I love so much. Leaning over her again I kiss her roughly, then a little gentler as she joins in with fervor. Bella is still grinning when I move back just enough to look down at her, obviously satisfied and quite the worse for wear, her hair sticking to her sweat-soaked face and arms.

"I think we're off to a good start to the day, wouldn't you say?"

Her answer is a cut-off throaty laugh, speaking of exhilaration as much as of exhaustion.

"Shit, I don't think I'll survive until tomorrow if you keep going like this!"

"Let's see about that, shall we?" I offer, then start to undo the restraints one by one. One thing I agree with, if we keep on like this, neither of us will be able to stand by evening, but I don't think that will be much of a problem if things go even roughly according to plan. For now I'm happy that we've had a good start to what is going to be a very long day for both of us.

Chapter 36

After a long shower and some restful time spent cuddling together in bed, we while away a good part of the day the way we do any other free time together. A long brunch included, we spend hours talking, reading, laughing, and on two occasions fucking, but nothing out of the ordinary. I'm still a little tempted to make her kneel on the floor or fetch me something, but in the end doing either of those would just leave me feeling stupid, so I refrain. By five in the afternoon we're both somewhat tired and sore, and I can tell that Bella is getting a little antsy again with excitement. She obviously expects me to have planned something to rival this morning's scene, and who am I to disappoint her?

"Why don't you go upstairs and take a shower? We'll be heading out in an hour," I say, finally putting an end to our lazing around. Bella looks surprised at first, seeing as she hasn't really worked up that much of a sweat since our last, somewhat extensive time hours ago in the bathroom, but then her face lights up.

"Heading out as in a dinner date?"

I shrug and leave it at a wry grin.

"Are you going to start questioning me now?"

Naturally she picks up on the sharp tone of my voice, her expression a weird cross between a meek smile and a raunchy leer.

"Of course not."

"Then off you go. I expect you ready and waiting for me at six o'clock in the bedroom. Naked."

While she's busy doing whatever women do when they think they need to prep themselves, I spend most of my time on the phone, making sure that everything works according to plan. When I go upstairs to dress myself I can still hear the blow dryer from the adjacent bathroom, mingled with some terribly off-key singing – it's one thing Bella is really bad at, but she would be insufferable if she were perfect.

I'm shrugging into my jacket when I hear her pad into the room behind me.

When I turn, she's already kneeling by the foot of the bed, head bent meekly, her hair flowing free in soft waves around her shoulders. She has put on some make-up, tasteful yet understated, as she usually does when she prepares for a special night out. I almost smirk at her addition of deep red lipstick. Bella never wears lipstick, as she claims she's not a dainty enough girl to only sip champagne and not leave stains everywhere.

Considering that I prefer her in jeans drinking a bottle of beer anyway, that has never even caused a raised eyebrow from me, but I certainly appreciate the thought.

Time to start the fun.

"You remember what I told you this morning before I changed plans?"

She nods, her eyes still fixed on the floor in front of her.

"Repeat it to me."

"I'm not to look at you or speak unless spoken to, and you expect me to be on my best behavior as your slave, Master."

It still sounds weird to me, but for what I've planned this should actually work. I hope.

"Good. Once we are around people you are allowed to look at me, but I still expect you to behave in a composed and polite manner, without any senseless chatting. Tonight I don't want to see any hesitation on your part to follow my instructions."

She remains kneeling, motionless, in silent acquiescence, until I tell her to get up.

"Choose a dress that is elegant but shows off your body."

Bella is quick to pick a short, black dress, holding it out for me to inspect.

"Do you need a bra with that?"

She looks pensive for a moment, then shakes her head.

"Good. Put that on with stay-up stockings and heels. Make sure you can walk in them."

In no time she is dressed, looking fabulous as expected. The sleek dress hugs her curves perfectly, leaving one shoulder completely free, the other barely covered due to its asymmetrical cut. At my direction she turns around, showing the dress off from all sides, and doesn't hesitate when I tell her to spread her legs and bend over. The skirt of the dress is short enough to ride up and expose her ass and pussy. I leave her standing like that while I fetch a few things from the playroom.

I'm not surprised when I find her just as I've left her, and she doesn't move much when I start to lube up her ass and spread her open with my fingers.

A low moan escapes her as I ease in the new plug she's not yet familiar with – it's larger than the medium-sized one we usually use, but I know that after taking in four of my fingers, she'll manage just fine. Lastly, I have her step into the straps affixed to a small butterfly vibrator, nestling it securely between her labia so that the toy can easily stimulate her clit and everything down to her vaginal opening. I felt somewhat stupid buying it, but even simple things like that can have their uses – even more so with the remote control safely stored away in my pocket.

After making sure that everything stays in place I tell Bella to straighten, and off we go. Always the gentleman, I of course help her into her coat and hold both the condo and car door for her, grinning to

myself at her utter lack of verbal response. I can't count the number of times she has accidentally bumped into me when I've tried similar moves, seeing as she's always been a 'do it yourself' kind of woman who doesn't need gallantry to get through her day, but the change is nice for an evening or two.

We don't talk on the car ride over to the restaurant on the other side of town where I've made our reservation. I keep glancing stealthily at her as she sits, her knees together and to the side, so much at ease that it's hard to believe she rarely wears dresses and heels. After parking the car I hold the door for her again and offer her my arm, which she takes with a small, polite smile. I'm sure that if I were to look into her eyes I'd see the same mirth flashing there that I feel, but as she sticks to my rules I'm forced to rely on her body language alone for an indication of her mood.

After a short trip in the elevator we exit on the top floor into the lavish sprawl of the restaurant. We are led to a table over by a window looking out over the city, where I deliberately steer her towards the seat that will leave her back towards the room, keeping her oblivious to anyone looking over at us. It's still relatively early, with only about half of the tables taken, the area around us mostly deserted.

A waiter appears by our side and I order red wine without asking Bella first

– not in a weird display of control, but simply because she doesn't drink white wine, and this isn't really an occasion for beer. She still glances at me somewhat uncertainly as she peruses the menu, and I wonder what she expects me to do next.

Mostly to increase her anticipation, I take my time scanning the menu myself, until I turn to her, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

"Found something you'd like, my dear?"

A frown appears on her forehead, without a doubt because of the term of endearment, but she quickly hides it again. Glancing from me back to the menu several times, she finally looks me in the eyes for the first time since I sent her for her shower hours ago.

"Everything sounds delicious, really. Anything you'd suggest?"

It gets harder by the minute to keep myself composed and not crack a huge smile, but I leave it at a shrug.

"Not particularly, no."

It only gets worse for me when she seems almost disappointed, but I'm sure that will change soon. The waiter returns with the wine and a bottle of water, and we place our order. Once he is out of earshot I aim for the most benign smile I can manage.

"How did you like our day so far?"

She tenses and I can see her try to stealthily glance over her shoulder to check if anyone is within earshot, and that's something that just won't do.

"Eyes remain on me. You don't really think I let you sit down there without a good reason."

Bella looks almost chagrined but her gaze remains fixed on my face. I watch her force herself to relax again as she slowly exhales.

"I enjoyed our day a lot."

Her tone is neutral but it's obvious that she thinks that goes without saying.

Feeling only somewhat evil, I absentmindedly slide my hand into my pocket to where the remote control is hidden, and push the 'on' switch with my subsequent order.

"Elaborate."

She utters a small yelp and straightens, a light blush creeping onto her cheeks. I know she must be thinking that everyone around us must be aware of what is going on, and it's a testament to her blind faith that it only takes her a moment to comply.

"I liked that at first you made me just kneel there, waiting for you to want to use me."

Her tone is breathy and she licks her lips after that sentence, and I reward her quick answer by hitting the button for the stronger vibration setting. Her eyes go wide and her left hand briefly grabs the tablecloth, but she shows a lot of control over her reactions and sounds almost normal when she goes on, her fingers relaxing once more.

"Yet as much as I enjoyed the anticipation, I'm glad you changed your mind about the scene. It was great suddenly not knowing at all how to react or what was to come. And it was fun to just let go and lose myself in the moment instead of having to hold back as I had been anticipating."

I nod, then switch off the vibrator again. Her shoulders sag a little with relief, and her hand is shaky when she takes a sip of wine, but she's unable to hide a wide smile.

"So you are not disappointed we didn't stick to our initial plan?"

"Not at all," she agrees.

Behind her I see the waiter get ready to bring some garlic bread and salad.

Trying hard not to let Bella see that my attention is split, I nod again, acknowledging her words.

"Which part of it did you enjoy the most?"

Just as she opens her mouth to reply, I switch the vibrator back on to the strongest setting, making her stutter to a halt before she even gets a word out. The waiter puts her salad down on the table in front of her and Bella's blush deepens to real mortification. She remains silent until she is sure we're alone again, even without checking over her shoulder. That won't do.

Keeping the vibe on, my eyes never leaving hers, I spear a slice of tomato with my fork and bite down succinctly on it.

"You should be aware that you only keep adding to your punishment if you keep defying me."

Confusion is obvious on her face for a second before she realizes that she hasn't yet answered me. This time she doesn't hesitate with her reply.

"When you fucked my ass, the plug, your fingers and cock."

Her voice is just a little breathy, betraying her state of arousal, and I keep the vibe on while I watch her push the lettuce around on her plate. When I finally switch it off again she sighs, and I have to grin at the somewhat reluctant quality of the sound escaping her. The temptation is strong to just keep it on until she can't hold back anymore, but I decide against that, as it would be too soon.

Throughout the entire meal I keep tormenting her like that, until I can tell that even with the vibrator switched off she's horny as hell and could come at any moment. While the food is fantastic, it's really me teasing her like this that makes it the meal perfect for me, and I don't think she has anything to complain about, either.

Bella only looks slightly surprised when I don't lead her to the elevator when we leave but instead steer her towards the terrace of the restaurant.

It's still too early in the season for anyone to want to eat outside. The lights are all out, leaving only scant illumination from the restaurant behind us once I close the glass door.

The city is a glittering sea of lights in front of us. I take her arm with a little more pressure than strictly necessary, and pull her along towards the farthest corner from the door. I'm sure that no one will come looking for us, but theoretically someone else could venture outside at any moment to take a smoke.

"Bend over at the waist, hands on the rail, and spread your legs."

She follows my command, and while it's too dark to get a good look at her face, I'm sure her cheeks must be burning brightly. The motion makes her dress hike up, and I only need to tug a little more on the hem to fully expose her ass, making the fabric pool at her lower back.

It's cold enough that I feel the slight sting of cool air on my hands and face, and I can only imagine how it must feel on her naked, exposed pussy. Her whole body jerks when I switch on the vibrator again, but at least she keeps silent and in position.

"You know that I'm going to punish you now."

Not a question but she obediently inclines her head, although she remains silent, seeing as we're no longer among people. Her skin is hot under my fingers as I trail them up one thigh to her ass, then down the other, letting my fingernails rake her skin slightly.

My first, hard slap finds her mostly unprepared, making her rock away from the impact on her right ass cheek, but she's fast to correct the instinctive motion. Barely a groan escapes her when I spank her again, and again, the sound of my hand hitting her ass loud in the night – or at least loud to us.

I really don't hold back, a fact that I soon feel in my palm. After about thirty or forty hard slaps, in her left leg starts shaking from the strain of holding the position. I love that she still hasn't made a sound or tried to shy away from me – in fact when I pause for a moment she wriggles her ass and pushes it towards me a little, making my pants rather uncomfortable.

I decide that she's had as much indirect stimulation as she needs for tonight and shut the vibe off for good, then push the straps that hold it in place down her legs, incidentally stroking her muscles along the way. She's shaking slightly by the time I get up again, but keeps taking the spanking in silence.

I'm too lazy to count, but I guess I must be somewhere around two hundred or so when I stop and rub her ass, digging my fingers into her hot butt cheeks. She utters the softest of moans when I accidentally push against the plug still firmly lodged inside of her. Always one to exploit her weaknesses, I do it again, this time deliberately, but all I get from her in return is a loud intake of breath.

Leaning over her until I can grip the rail right next to her hand, I kiss her jaw, then lightly nudge the side of her neck with my nose while my fingers keep drumming on the plug.

"Do you want me to fuck your ass, right here, out in the open, where anyone could just walk in on us at any moment?"

Her head jerks up so fast that she almost hits me with the back of it. When I slap her hard once, she answers verbally, too.

"Yes, Master, please!"

"I'm not doing this for your benefit," I tell her, then laugh when she keeps pushing her ass into the hand that still rests on it. "I'm only using you to get off, cum-hungry slut that you are."

Bella remains silent but I'm sure that the shiver running through her isn't just from the goose bumps marching over her skin.

"Do you want to be used?" I continue, whispering into her ear. "Do you like being fucked just for my amusement?"

Her answer comes immediately, her voice high and breathless.

"Yes, Master!"

Chuckling darkly I reach back and grip the base of the plug, pulling it out just enough for her anus to slowly relinquish the largest part of it, before I push it back in. Even in the dark I can see the muscles in her arms stand out more clearly as she grips the rail harder, bracing herself against the pleasurable sensation.

When I pull it out completely I straighten, then hold it to her mouth.

"Lick it clean, then suck on it as much as you can."

Bella obediently extends her tongue to obey me, not hesitating for a moment. Once she has gotten most of the lube off the toy I push it into her mouth, letting her suck on it for a little while. The downside of using a large plug is that its diameter is too large to fit between her teeth, but I think we can both deal with that disadvantage. When I grow tired of watching her suck obediently on the plug, I switch it around and insert the base in her mouth.

"Keep it in. While I fuck your ass I want you to keep licking and sucking on it as much as you can."

Seeing the business end of the plug protrude from her mouth as it softly bobs up and down with the motions of her mouth makes my hard-on almost painful, and I decide I've fooled around long enough.

A few hard slaps on her ass later, I unzip my pants and free my cock, and after slathering on some more lube I push directly into her ass. Bella moans softly while her hips rock back towards me, the gag muffling most of the sound coming from her throat, but of course doing nothing to dim the squelch of the lube.

Without further ado I grab her hips and start fucking her hard, her heels lending her just the right height so that the position isn't uncomfortable for me and I can thrust into her as fast and deep as I want. Which I do, while my fingers keep digging into her flesh.

I'm ready to come much too quickly so I slow down, slapping her ass some more while I set a more leisurely pace. She's panting loudly but otherwise tries to keep from making any sounds, while her legs are shaking from both the strain of the position and from trying to keep from reaching her orgasm.

If I were really evil I would just reach around and rub her clit. I'm sure she would be unable to hold back then, but I don't feel like it right now. Simply letting her take what I dish out is enough, and feels great.

With a few hard thrusts I finally come inside of her, making sure I push my cock in as deep as possible. Her legs tremble a lot when I pull back out, and I quickly grab the plug from between her teeth. Rolling it in the trickle of sperm coming from her ass, I push it back into her, making sure that the mess making her thighs sticky doesn't increase any further.

"Stand straight."

She complies immediately, nearly losing her footing for a moment, then turns to face me when I pull on her elbow softly. Even in the dim light I can see how wild her eyes are, but once I've wiped the drool off her chin she looks remarkably composed – for someone standing naked from the waist down on a rooftop in April.

Reaching for the side of her neck, I gently cradle her head while I stroke her cheek, then pull her close to kiss her with a lot of heat and need, which soon simmers down to languid lust. My free hand finds

her ass and I grab it, pushing my knee between her still spread legs so I can rub my thigh against her exposed sex. Bella stays passive for a while before I give an affirmative grunt when she slowly strokes my side. Then her arms are around my shoulders and she's melting against me, deepening the kiss even further.

The sound of the door opening somewhere behind us makes me still, but as all they could possibly see is my back, I don't really mind. Still, I grab the hem of her dress and slide it down over her exposed ass, just to be sure.

The sound of conversations spilling out cuts off quickly as the door closes again, and a look over my shoulder reveals that we're still alone.

When I turn back to her I find Bella grinning up at me, her fingers idly playing with the short hairs at the nape of my neck. I return her smile, then gently extract myself from her. Keeping one hand splayed over the small of her back, I lead her towards the door, this time to leave for good.

Thankfully we encounter very few people on the way to the coat check and down to the car, and none of them look at us too closely. I can't help feeling like it must be obvious to everyone that we've just fucked on the roof, but it's a feeling of exhilaration, not one of concern. The smile playing around the corners of Bella's mouth tells me that she's thinking along the same lines.

All gentleman, I hold the door of the car for her again before I get in myself.

She relaxes into the seat, about to re-arrange her legs in a lady-like manner, but I keep her from it by placing one hand on her knee.

"Keep your legs spread."

I can feel the muscles in her thighs relax before she obediently opens them further, suddenly no longer as much at ease as before. I give her a slightly wry grin as I turn away and ease into traffic, dividing my attention between her and the road.

Minutes pass by and I watch her lose that slightly guarded look again.

Stopping at a red light I check my watch, then take a left turn that brings us into the dark parking lot of a store that has closed down for the night already. Bella looks slightly bewildered but I can clearly see anticipation light up her gaze.

"Close your eyes and lean forward a little."

She obeys immediately and I reach across her to get a blindfold out of the glove compartment. On the outside it looks a little like a sleeping mask, but the padding around the eyes and lower rim prevents any light from actually reaching her eyes once I put it on her, so that she's now cast into complete darkness.

When I pull back into traffic, the sound of her decidedly increased breathing is the only noise that I hear from her, but now all of the previous ease is gone from her posture. The temptation is there to

simply ask her what she thinks I'm up to, but I know that my silence is an integral part of pulling her under fast.

We're nearly at our destination when I speak up, her head turning instinctively toward the sound of my voice.

"Take off the dress, but leave the shoes and stockings on."

As before she doesn't hesitate, even though her mind must be racing. As I haven't specified what she should do with the dress, she leaves it discarded on the floor between her legs once she has shimmied out of it.

Just to fuck with her I take a wrong turn, in the unlikely event that she has kept track of our moves and knows where we might be. Not that our destination is that hard to guess.

Just before we reach the last intersection, I tell her to hold out her hand, then give her the clover clamps, connected by a short chain.

"Put these on your nipples."

By the time I park the car Bella is positively vibrating with tension, her nipples hard not just because of the clamps now constricting them. She remains sitting motionless when I turn off the engine, then get out of the car. My cock is hard again and I briefly consider fucking Bella's mouth to take care of that. Now that we're alone and out of sight of anyone who might sic the cops on us I could actually enjoy it without second thoughts.

In the end I decide against it because that would likely take her mind off being psyched over what she doesn't yet know, and I want to keep her out of her usual comfort zone as long as possible.

She doesn't move until I open the door and take her hand, and her fingers dig almost painfully into the arm that I offer her for support. I inwardly curse her stupid heels when she almost trips during the short walk from the car to the door, and I walk backwards in front of her as I lead her down the stairs.

A ghost of a smile flits over her face when her suspicions about our destination are confirmed, but she keeps silent.

Downstairs I pause for a moment, wondering if I should utter any last minute directions, but I know that they are not really necessary. The time for intimacy and languid kisses has passed; now we're up to something more fun.

Switching my grip from her arm to the chain between the nipple clamps, I tug roughly on them until she takes the hint and follows me. I'm proud that she immediately assumes her usual standing position – spread legs and arms crossed behind her back – when I stop at the last door downstairs, then lead her inside.

As I suspected from the number of cars outside, we're the last to arrive, which suits me just fine. Heads turn but no one stops speaking when we enter. I leave Bella standing three steps into the room

then walk over, alone, to greet everyone. I'm sure that Bella recognizes at least some of them by their voices, most of all Beth and her loud, slightly edgy laugh, but at this point I don't really care. Peter and I shake hands, Charlotte hugs me fondly, and Beth either attempts to crack my ribs or doesn't quite succeed at fondling my ass, I'm not quite sure which. Gerard leaves his greeting at a silent nod which tells me that, while Beth has allowed him to stay clothed tonight, he's on some kind of restriction I don't intend to breach.

Our community is a small and very informal group normally, but tonight everyone is wearing dresses and suits, although Charlotte's is made of vibrant purple latex. A few more minutes pass with chatter and bantering, while I keep eyeing the center of my attention, at the moment still waiting patiently next to the door where I left her.

When we run out of things that needed to be said and excuses for making Bella wait, I extricate myself from the merry band of misfits and walk back to her. I can see her straighten a little as she hears me approach, but she doesn't make a sound when I stop behind her and pull her against me, one of my hands grabbing her breast, the other on her lower stomach, inches away from her pussy.

"I hope you didn't think we'd go straight home after dinner, because as you must have realized by now, I'm not done with you for tonight."

She doesn't react verbally to my words but I hear her utter a low moan under her breath, a clear sign of just how excited she is. Digging my fingers into her tit, I let my other hand stray down to rub over her labia, already wet and swollen with excitement. A quick lick over the side of her neck has her shuddering, and she gasps when I bite down there none too gently.

When I speak, I pitch my voice loud enough to carry, even if my words aren't news to anyone.

"You asked me to be my obedient slave for the day, to be used and abused however I see fit, to please me in whatever way you can, right?"

She doesn't need a hard pinch of her nipple to answer, but the gasp she utters when I do just that anyway goes straight to my cock.

"Yes, Master."

Kissing the skin where I've just bitten down, I go on, a wry grin on my face that Bella obviously can't see.

"I think it will please me a lot to watch you service my friends."

Another kiss while she moans again, her body now covered in goose bumps, and when I let go and step around to her front, I see her lick her lips. Trying hard to suppress a snort, I reach for the chain between the nipple clamps again and pull on it, making her follow me quickly across the room.

Her excitement coupled with her inability to see makes her stumble again, and this time I've had enough. I stop her with a hand on her shoulder, and tell her to kick off the damn heels before something happens to end this wonderful day at my less-than-wonderful workplace. There's a time

and place for heels, but blindfolded in a playroom is not it, seeing as neither of us has a foot fetish or a desire for an Emergency Room trip.

A lot surer on her bare feet, Bella follows me as I keep leading her across the room, then make her stop next to a table the others are standing next to.

"Climb onto the table, then turn around so that everyone can see you.

Spread your legs and keep the heels of your feet on the table, and lean back on your elbows."

She follows my instructions quickly and to the letter, with minimal fumbling around the furniture with her fingers as she still can't see a thing. By the time she's done rearranging herself, her cheeks are flushed with excitement, the knowledge that she's presenting herself for everyone to see clearly adding to the fun.

I let her lie there in silence for a bit, waiting for her anticipation to build, before I briefly run my fingers over her exposed cunt. The plug is still comfortably wedged in her ass, and she bites down on her lower lip to stifle a moan when I push lightly on it, making it move inside of her. She loses the battle when I skim my fingers upwards again over her swollen labia, then stay stroking them, making sure to touch the rings of her piercings along with her flesh.

"About these," I briefly stop to pull on one of the rings. "I'm not sure the others know. Did you ask me before you got them?"

"No, Master."

"Did you even tell me beforehand?"

She's still smiling when she replies.

"No, Master."

"Do you have any idea how many hours I've spent frustrated and with a hard-on because you got your cunt lips pierced and I had to wait months for them to be healed enough to play with?"

"A lot I hope, Master," she replies, her usual cockiness shining through for a moment, something I reward with a hard slap right on her pussy, making her cry out – but not stop smiling.

"Damn right you are," I grunt, then continue stroking her labia. "Whose cunt is this?"

We don't really do any of the possessive role playing crap usually, so I'm surprised when she answers with a meek, "Yours, Master."

"Indeed. And while I'm happy to let my friends use your mouth and ass, I don't want anyone to use my cunt. I should make sure that no mishaps happen there, don't you think?"

"Yes, Master."

Her voice has gotten even throatier than before, every breath heavy and loud now, and she lets out something close to a mewl when I start removing one ring after the other from her outer labia. The piercings have all healed completely a while ago but paranoia had me waiting another couple of weeks for something like this.

Once her labia are completely unadorned I stop, then look up to her face where she's again chewing on her bottom lip. While keeping her blindfolded until now has served me well, I think it's time to give her some visual stimulation, too.

"Take the blindfold off."

She shifts her weight onto one shoulder so that she doesn't need to move her body too much, then pushes the blindfold back, blinking a little from the light for a moment before she is able to see anything. Her eyes flit to me for a second but then she looks down, not really a sign of demureness, but at least a shot at it.

Reaching into the pocket of my jacket I get a small box out, then put it next to her foot so that she can't see inside it right away. With nothing else to focus on, her gaze falls to her pussy when I pick up stroking her labia again, then I pinch the puffy flesh until she moans.

Opening the box I get out two rings, both similar to the four she's been wearing in design but slightly thicker and with a larger diameter. Her breath hitches again, then gets more labored when I put one ring through the top two piercings of her labia, and the other through the bottom two, effectively pulling her labia closer together and keeping them that way. I'm sure that she's dying to touch them but she doesn't even try. Another moan escapes her when I reach into the box again and reveal a small padlock to keep the two rings locked together.

Once I'm done putting everything in place I gently pull on the padlock, making her utter another of those sinful, low noises. With just two pairs of piercings it's really mostly a cosmetic setup, seeing as I could still put anything from two fingers to a vibrator into her cunt. Both the psychological effect and the unfamiliar sensation from the increased weight and the consequential pull on her pussy lips definitely adds to her horniness.

"Get on your hands and knees, then present your cunt and ass to those you will be entertaining shortly."

Bella follows my directions, even if her hands and legs are so shaky that it takes her a lot longer than it should. Once she's kneeling there with her thighs spread and her ass pushed in the air, she seems to calm down a bit more. The padlock swings enticingly until she has stopped moving, and she shudders again when I flick it idly with my finger.

"I'm not sure everyone can really see you that well," I go on, stepping to the side. She obediently brings her hands to her behind and pulls her cheeks further apart, making the base of the butt plug that much more obvious where it rests against her skin.

"She's all yours." I turn to the others, gesturing at Bella while I step further away from her. "Use her

well."

Every one of them has a copy of Bella's checklist as well as the list that's still lying untouched in our nightstand, and they know that 'do whatever you want' translates into just a handful of things that I've talked about with Beth.

Yet, as the point of the scene is for Bella to get to live her idea of being passed around and used by others for my amusement, I don't point that out again. She trusts me blindly and knows that she can use her safeword at any moment if she needs it, but right now anticipation and lack of definite knowledge about what's going to happen are obviously what she appreciates most.

I somehow expected Beth or Peter to be the first to speak up, seeing as it's usually the more dominant people who don't just stand around and wait for something to happen and for others to break the tension, but it's Charlotte who steps away from her husband's side and walks over to Bella.

"Such a pretty girl we have here," she remarks as she runs her fingers over Bella's ass and down one thigh, skipping over the dark marks left over from whip, cane and fingers digging in alike. "But I think there's something missing. Show us your tits."

Bella straightens obediently, then shimmies around until she's facing the group, lacing her fingers together behind her head. Charlotte purses her lips as she runs her finger along the chain, not pulling on it but obviously making Bella feel it.

"Ah, I know, you would be so much prettier in a corset."

She turns around and walks back to the main group, then bends down and retrieves Bella's cyan-colored, satin waist-cincher from the toy bag I've left at Beth's the day before. Her motions are quick and efficient when she starts tightening the laces at Bella's back, and she keeps going until Bella looks vaguely uncomfortable, but still highly aroused.

"You're a big girl, I don't think I need to coddle you," Charlotte tells her when she ties off the laces, then runs her hands admiringly over Bella's restricted waist and up to her tits. Unlike what I would have expected from Beth, she leaves it at a few soft touches, stroking and caressing and in a way teasing Bella more than any kind of pinching would have.

She then resumes her former place with a smile in my direction, and her husband is next. Peter stops in front of Bella and just stares at her with that unnerving calm I think I'll never perfect myself. Already horny as hell, Bella starts to get jumpy quickly, acting just as he must have intended.

"You're not really much use to us if you fidget like that." Looking over at me, he raises his brows. "Care to lend me a hand? Just for old times' sake."

"Of course," I nod, then follow him to the extensive rope rack at the other side of the playroom. It feels just like it did years ago when he was teaching me how to do proper bondage. Peter picks up coil after coil of rope and deposits them in my arms, before we return to Bella. He eyes her critically but now it's more the gaze of an artist considering his canvas rather than an attempt to fuck with her

mind, but it still has about the same effect.

When he's satisfied with whatever he's come up with in his mind, he tells Bella to follow him over to the already conveniently set up suspension ring, hanging down from the ceiling on a thick hemp rope connected to the winch at the wall.

The first thing he does is remove the clover clamps from her nipples, making her wince a little when he twists her nipples once they are free again. After telling her to gather her hair up in a quick ponytail and to keep her hands at her back, he starts with some basic breast bondage – several turns of rope around her torso and arms. He then ties her wrists and arms together and to the other ropes, before he uses two last lengths to wind around each of her boobs, forcing them to stick out due to the amount of compression on them.

Positioning Bella in a wide stance underneath the suspension ring, Peter starts on the rope harness she will be hanging from later. I normally anchor my bondage at her upper back, but he seems to have something else in mind. He winds the rope double-stranded around her upper thighs, then brings it around her ass and over her hip back to the leg he started on. He obviously intends to anchor the center of her weight there, leaving more range of movement to her torso.

He follows this with more rope around her lower thighs before he tells her to lie on her back on the floor. With her arms tied behind her it takes some maneuvering on her part to get into position, but she eventually manages when no one steps in to help her. Once she is stretched out, Peter connects the thick bundles of rope on her upper thighs to the ring that he has lowered further, then adds more rope around her legs – above and below the knee – to also tie those binds to the center ring above her. At last he runs a rope through the ties on her torso to pull in the breast bondage, too.

Once he has made sure that all the knots are holding, he nods at me and I walk over to the winch, hoisting Bella into the air, her entire body parallel to the floor. Peter tells me to stop once she has reached about hip level of everyone standing there, then continues with her ankles, tying them to the thigh ropes that also hold most of her weight.

That way Bella is pretty much helpless and without much range of movement, beyond a little in her legs, and some in her neck. I almost expect Peter to be done but he makes one last trip to the rope rack, returning with two lengths of twine that he subsequently ties around her nipples, the barbell in each piercing anchoring the string and letting him wind it around her nipples tightly. The other end of the twine goes up to the suspension ring as well, forcing her to slightly arch her back to relieve the tension. It all looks relatively harmless, but I know that half an hour from now her whole body will ache from the strain of just keeping her back straight – and I get the feeling that they won't just let her hang decoratively around like this, either.

Beth joins Peter where he's standing next to Bella, and she beams her signature evil grin down at her soon-to-be victim. A pluck on the strings attached to Bella's nipples yields a rather loud grunt, but as usual Beth isn't satisfied until she has made someone scream – a lot. She and Peter then walk over to her supplies, talking in hushed voices, clearly working on some last minute idea. Charlotte meanwhile takes Peter's former place by Bella's side, smiling down at her while she undoes Bella's ponytail and lets her hair cascade down a good distance towards the floor.

She straightens and looks down Bella's body, before she starts touching her again, all soft caresses, staying away from anything important. There's not really that much of Bella's torso left that's not either covered by her corset or with rope so Charlotte walks around her to stroke her thighs, making Bella strain a little towards her in hopes that Charlotte will touch her in more intimate places than her knees.

Beth and Peter return, making Bella look away from Charlotte and regard the other two upside-down as she hangs her head. Peter is armed with a heavy flogger and a paddle while Beth seems to have returned empty-handed. I'm not fooled, though, seeing that she hides something in her right fist between her body, away from where Bella can see it. From the way Bella is frowning I think she doesn't buy it either, but of course she doesn't say anything.

Stepping between Bella's spread thighs, Beth scrutinizes the two rings I've used to replace Bella's piercing jewelry, then gently tugs on them.

"Does that hurt?"

"No, Mistress."

Beth allows herself a small smile at the quick reply, then pulls rather roughly on them again. A low groan, part pain, part pleasure, answers her, but she repeats her question nevertheless. Bella's reply remains the same, although now her tone is somewhat strained.

"Well, if that's the case, I'm sure you won't have any problems with these, either."

An expert at knowing when a well placed pause has more impact than any threat, she waits for a moment, then clips a thin chain to the clasp of the padlock, and starts adding weights to the dangling end of it. Bella lets out a throaty mumble that I think is a half-swallowed curse, the muscles in her thighs standing out when she tenses to brace for more pain to come. And more pain is coming, one added weight at a time, each underlined by Bella's soft gasps, then louder ones, until Beth's hand is empty.

Still grinning brightly, Beth walks around Bella and stops by her head, looking deeply into her eyes.

"Does it hurt now?"

"Yes, Mistress!"

"Good," she retorts, then turns her head and glances over to where Gerard is still standing without having moved a muscle since greeting me. "Fetch me one of the blocks from over there."

He quickly obeys, bringing one of the makeshift wooden steps to her that mostly get used as a replacement for stairs – or to level height differences.

He dutifully puts it down underneath Bella's head before he steps away again, eyes downcast.

Meanwhile, Peter hands Charlotte the paddle, then takes position between Bella's legs.

"Keep your knees spread."

Bella tries to increase the distance between her thighs as much as she can, considering how she is tied up, and tenses with anticipation. Unlike Beth and me, Peter's sadistic side rarely surfaces, which is a good thing, considering that for his wife an over the knee spanking equals punishment.

But like us, he's never one to pass up a chance when it presents itself, so when he brings the flogger down on Bella's left thigh it is with enough force to make her jerk in her bonds. Her knees remain open, though, and he continues, his pace measured and his aim true.

Bella's forehead is soon scrunched up with pain and concentration, but Beth doesn't give her much of a chance to let herself mentally fall into the flogging. Undoing a zipper at the side of her long leather skirt, she swings her freed leg over Bella's head and onto the step, bringing her pussy right in front of Bella's face.

"Lick me."

Bella has to crane her neck to be able to reach Beth, but I can't say if Beth reaching down and grabbing her hair to pull her head up is really 'helping'

much. The image of her grinding her pussy into Bella's face while she keeps her head locked there is certainly hot, and Bella quickly sets to the task, whether her roots are killing her or not.

For a brief while it is almost silent in the playroom, except for Peter's even strokes of the flogger on Bella's thighs. Only when he switches targets and aims at her cunt, incidentally making the chain with the weights swing, do things get a little more interesting.

It's impossible to say if the muffled sounds she's making are from pain or pleasure, and I'm sure that by now Bella has serious trouble discerning between the two anyway. Beth definitely approves of the added vibrations, allowing herself a moan or two, her hips rocking against Bella's face.

"Oh, you like that, do you? Being in the middle of all that attention, our little pain Slut and fucktoy?"

Bella's unintelligible answer is clearly affirmative, even if it ends in a high shout as Peter switches to the paddle. The next contact of leather on her pussy is a lot more painful than Bella must have anticipated. She even tries to close her legs and buck away from him, but there's not enough freedom in the bonds to let her do that. Instead of stopping, Peter increases both the speed and strength of the hits until Bella stops fighting, instead screaming into Beth's pussy.

Once he's satisfied with having made his point, he slows down and concentrates on her thighs instead, and Bella's sobs are almost drowned out by Beth's moans. Apparently Bella hasn't really stopped licking and sucking on her pussy, or is increasing her efforts now, because it doesn't take long until Beth comes, briefly smothering Bella as she keeps her locked in place.

Bella lets her head hang down once Beth lets go of her hair, her face red and sticky now, but before she can relax, Charlotte appears by her side.

"My turn now. Open your mouth."

She waits patiently until Bella raises her head again, then inserts a ball gag with a dildo attached on the outside into Bella's mouth, quickly buckling the straps in place to prevent her from spitting it out. Charlotte barely has to roll up the hem of her dress to be able to straddle Bella's head, then slides down on the dildo until her pussy is almost flush with Bella's nose.

"Fuck me. I'm not going to do the work for you."

Bella sets to the task with fervor, even though the strain must be killing her neck, and almost immediately a string of muffled groans leaves her throat.

A quick look at the tautness of the strings leading up from her nipples reveals the source for those – and they increase exponentially when Beth starts plucking on them while watching the dildo disappear into Charlotte's pussy over and over again.

Peter eventually stops paddling Bella to watch what is going on, and after about a minute or so steps up to them to fondle Charlotte's breasts while kissing her passionately. At his quick direction she undoes the fly of his pants and starts stroking his cock while still kissing him, right next to Bella's face where she can see. Soon Charlotte is begging to come. When Peter finally allows her to, she does so with a loud scream before she eases herself off the dildo, right onto her knees where Peter starts to fuck her from behind. Bella's gaze is transfixed on them, ignoring Beth while she removes her gag, at least until Beth pulls on the strings surrounding her nipples, hard enough to make Bella scream and snap her head up.

Smiling as if she hasn't done anything, Beth then turns to Gerard, almost forgotten on the sidelines again. She just snaps her fingers and points at the floor, making him drop to his knees and crawl over to her immediately.

He follows her dutifully as she walks to the area between Bella's legs, then pulls the butt plug out of her. It only takes another point of her hand and he lowers his face to Bella's ass, then starts to lick around and into her anus, still open from hours of wearing the plug.

Bella relaxes almost instantly, enjoying the sensation even when Beth unclips the weighted chain, which makes her yowl for a moment. Gerard only uses his tongue and lips, his hands obediently on his thighs, and he soon has Bella trying to rock into his face as much as the bonds let her.

Her eyes stray in my direction for a moment before she goes back to watching Charlotte get banged from behind, idly licking her lips all the while.

Peter finally climaxes, pulling out at the last moment so he can shoot his come all over Charlotte's back, then helps her to her feet. She's still a little unsteady and leans into his embrace as they both watch Gerard continue to lick Bella's ass, making her sigh and moan softly every so often.

"Do you think she looks bored? I think she needs a little something to challenge her," Charlotte observes dryly. Beth nods, then picks up a bottle of lube and commands Gerard to stop, with another

snap of her fingers. He pulls away and remains kneeling at her side.

After having had to strain her neck for so long, Bella simply doesn't have the energy anymore to see what is going on between her legs. While Gerard and Beth switch places she slumps in her bonds, but tenses a little again when she feels Beth's well-lubricated fingers push into her ass.

Clearly enjoying the sensation, she soon tries to hump back but with little success, besides making the strings pull on her nipples a little more. After all the action Bella's ass has seen today it doesn't take long until Beth has four of her fingers worked in, but it actually takes her tucking her thumb in and easing it along slowly with yet more lube for Bella to catch on.

That moment is easy to recognize for she goes still, then her eyes snap to me, wide and full of need even from upside down. She utters a barely audible 'fuck!' under her breath, making me smirk at her, before she relaxes almost completely.

"What did you just say?" Beth asks with a teasing lilt to her voice, her fingers already pushing in up to her knuckles.

"Nothing, Mistress."

"Are you sure? Because I swear I heard you say something. Some kind of protest maybe?"

"No, Mistress."

Beth pushes a little more, then stops, withdrawing a bit so she can squirt more lube onto her hand, and as if in afterthought, also over Bella's clit.

Holding the bottle out to Gerard, she doesn't even look to see if he's ready to catch it before she lets go, then starts rubbing Bella's clit while continuing to work her fist into her ass.

Until then Bella has been good about keeping herself in check, but with her body tired and screaming for release, plus the added excitement, the more direct stimulation soon makes her jerk in her bonds and moan loudly. Her eyes flutter shut but snap open every so often, and she's writhing in the ropes as much as the tight restriction will let her.

Bella seems close to begging for release when Beth finally has mercy on her nerves and pushes that little bit more, making Bella's anus ease up enough to allow her entire hand to slide inside. Yet unlike me, Beth doesn't stop there but continues to rotate her wrist and move her hand inside Bella, not easing up until Bella's hoarse moan cuts through the room.

"Please let me come, Mistress!"

"Not yet."

Frustration has Bella screwing her eyes shut and balling her hands into fists where they are still bound underneath her back.

"Please, please, PLEASE!" she keeps shouting, fighting in her bonds and inevitably adding even more friction to what Beth is already supplying.

The answer, though, remains the same. "No."

Bella actually starts crying with frustration then, her body torn between going rigid with the impending orgasm she's trying to fight and the dire need to come. I've seldom seen her this horny. Hours of teasing with little relief have left her strung out, but even between her sobs she continues to ask and plead.

My cock is so painfully hard that I nearly come myself when Beth finally utters a single, low, "Come," but to watch Bella succumb and thrash around in the ropes is more rewarding in some ways. Beth continues to fuck Bella until she goes still again, then slows down a little but she still manages to coax another orgasm out of her barely two minutes after the first.

Beth finally withdraws her hand with a sloppy sound, then holds it out to Gerard to lick it clean, but my concentration is on Bella alone now as I walk over to her and crouch down next to her face. Her eyes are half closed, her face a mess of snot, tears, sweat and makeup, but she has seldom looked more beautiful to me. I kiss her gently at first but she's obviously hungry for my attention, deepening the kiss and sucking eagerly on my tongue when I push it into her mouth.

Her reaction tells me one thing clearly – she may now be too tired to even kneel on the floor, but she's still horny as fuck, and there's no need for me to hold back. Gathering her hair in my hand as much to support her head as to wrench it up so I can sneer in her face, I stare down at her.

"I'm now going to fuck your cunt, and you better fucking come again before I'm done with you, do you understand?"

She nods eagerly, her gaze feverish and filled with need. I let go of her and quickly walk around her, pushing down my pants. My previous assessment has been partly true – swollen as her labia still are, the piercings are high enough so I can comfortably thrust my cock into her pussy, although I'm sure she feels every single motion magnified on the outside now, too.

Grabbing the ropes that keep her suspended I start fucking her, pulling her towards me as much as thrusting forward. She's so wet and ready that I feel my resistance dwindle fast, her cunt gripping my cock soon as she's about to obey the one order she rarely gets to hear.

"Please let me-" she still starts to beg, but as much as I love hearing her voice, right now it just speeds things up for me beyond what I want.

"Come!" I bark at her, then throw my head back and do my best not to succumb myself when I feel her squeeze me hard, her whole body bucking in her bonds. Try as I might, I don't manage to hold out much longer than a couple of seconds, then spend myself deep inside her yet again.

The huge advantage of having three people in the same scene who know their way around ropes is that it takes a fraction of the time it would normally take to get Bella out of bondage once she's gently

lowered down onto the floor. Before long I have the sniffling, laughing, satisfied mess that she is in my arms, leaving unspeakable gunk on my clothes although I really don't give a shit about that. The only thing I care about is her smile and her eager kisses, and the sure knowledge that one way or another, I've given her exactly what she wants.

It takes a while to coax some cookies and coke into her to give her body enough sustenance so I can help her up and to the showers. She insists she can clean herself up sufficiently on her own, sitting on the floor of the shower stall, thank you very much. I leave her to it but wait just outside the door, ready to jump in should she need me, but certain that I'm being overprotective. Even when she comes wobbling out she's torn between trying to put up a cocky front and just meekly submitting to my not-quite-suggestion when I hold out some sweat pants and a sweater to her. She finally admits that we'll be both faster and less prone to hazards if I just pick her up and carry her to the car.

I leave Beth to clean up the mess after she shouts at me to be gone, strap-on in hand while she kicks Gerard's discarded clothes to the side. I leave them to their evening entertainment to join Bella in the car. Peter and Charlotte have left already, and I'm happy to be home twenty minutes later.

Bella is too tired to shower a second time so I just deposit her on the bed, then quickly undress both of us and crawl under the covers with her. I reach down between her legs to switch the piercing rings to her usual jewelry but she bats my hand away and in no uncertain terms tells me that until morning she's quite happy to remain my pleasure slave in every sense of the word.

Lucky for her I'm tired enough not to take her up on that, but simply curl myself around her, happy to simply be here with her in my arms. She's about to fall asleep when I nudge her awake again so I can kiss her, and tell her how much I love her. Grinning brightly she mumbles something into my mouth when she kisses me in turn that I think is the conventional reply to all such statements, or the ever classic 'I know,' but she's out cold before I can tease her about it.

Only when I'm about to drift off myself do I realize that even though we have the entire bed to ourselves tonight, we're still curled up together on the right half of it. The other side of it is glaringly empty, and it's missing more than just a warm body to snuggle up against Bella's chest.

Chapter 37

"Honeys, I'm home!"

My eyes flutter open at the sound of a familiar voice floating up through the condo to the bedroom. I blink, half turning to the side so I can get a look at the alarm clock.

7:09 A.M.

Jazz shouldn't even have left California yet, and still, somehow he's already home. I feel a smile tug at the corner of my mouth, my brain still sluggish with sleep, as I listen to the telltale sound of the fridge door opening and closing. Then steps on the stairs, and the bedroom door is flung open.

Bella rouses enough so that she's somewhat aware of her surroundings, but just enough to grumble something unintelligible and wrench her pillow over her head. She remains lying like that on her stomach, otherwise motionless.

I smile up at Jazz as he walks around the bed, then reach for him and kiss him. Only briefly it turns out, as he pulls away with a noise of disgust at the back of his throat, but he grins down at me.

"No offense, but you smell gross."

"Do not," I grunt back, but a vague sniff in the general direction of my body underlines just how accurate his assessment is.

While I disentangle myself from Bella and the sheets, Jazz starts unpacking his suitcase. He's careful to make a wide detour around the heap of discarded clothing left on the floor from last night. I shake my head at his antics as I pick them up, and deposit them in the hamper before I hit the bathroom.

By the time I'm done showering, Jazz has miraculously lost most of his own clothes, and is crawling onto the bed to tease Bella awake. I stop just inside the door, leaning against the frame while I watch this truly bizarre spectacle.

Bella has always been resistant to waking up, but given her exhaustion from yesterday's activities, I can understand why she wants to grab more than just a couple of hours sleep. Jazz is a lot less sympathetic than I am, though. He seems hell-bent on getting his head bitten off, from the way he's now sidling up to her.

"Bella, oh sweetest Bella," he keeps cooing, but the only reaction he gets is a grunt from underneath her pillow that is as unintelligible as it is hostile.

Undeterred, Jazz nudges her shoulder, then grabs the pillow and starts wrestling it from her grasp. Or tries to, but the only thing he receives for his efforts is her badly aimed kick to his leg.

Deciding that this won't do, he switches tactics. Bella utters a muffled shout when he tackles her, and

tries to roll them both over. That finally gets her to move for real, but when she tries to push away from him he holds her down, his whole body more or less perched on her back.

"Let me up, you stupid oaf!"

"Stupid oaf, eh? What kind of crappy romance novel have you been reading? Is that the worst you can come up with?" he taunts, then starts tickling her. Bella shrieks, now fighting to throw him off for real, but worn out as she is Jazz has no problem keeping her underneath him.

She finally gives up and looks pleadingly over at me; I'm hard pressed not to laugh at them both.

"Help me!"

"Now that's unfair," Jazz grumbles, then eases up and rolls off her, coming to lay side by side with her. Bella sneers at him, then grins and settles back into her pillow. She groggily rubs her eyes and yawns loudly, without covering her mouth.

"You're early."

Jazz nods as I repeat my observation, briefly looking from me to her as I join them on the bed at Bella's other side.

"There wasn't really much to hold me in California. A little flirting with one of the stewardesses got me rebooked on a flight this morning."

"That's so typical of you!" Bella groans accusingly, snuggling back against me once I pull the covers up over my body again. Jazz actually looks a bit offended, but that doesn't change the brightness of his grin.

"Hey, it was just some harmless talking! And she was weirded out when I told her I wanted to return home earlier because I had two wonderful people waiting for me. She asked if I had a picture of my kid there, and I told her that both of them were older than me."

Bella huffs at that.

"You can be such a charmer. And she probably thought you were still living with your parents."

"She so did not!" he scoffs, then pushes himself up on one elbow, briefly looking at me before he resumes talking to Bella.

"So what have you two been up to while I was gone? Did you miss me?"

"I always miss you. No one could ever annoy me as much as you do," she quips in return. Jazz pretends to be deeply hurt for a moment, but takes it in stride.

"You would just become complacent and bored without me annoying you."

"That's beside the point!"

"And you really missed me? You're not just saying that because you're afraid I'll end up putting itching powder in your knickers?"

Bella scoffs, ready to hurl another insult at him, but then stops. A light frown appears on her forehead, and her eyes narrow. When she speaks again, her tone has changed; it's no longer petulant and teasing, but now has a clear note of seriousness to it.

"Jazz, you know that we always miss you. Both of us."

He actually looks chagrined, and for all intents and purposes avoids Bella's gaze while he fidgets with the corner of her duvet. I feel her tense under my arm before she groans, then pushes herself up onto all fours and crawls onto Jazz until their foreheads are almost touching. The motion makes the sheet slip off her, revealing a plethora of bruises and marks all over her back, ass and thighs. Their position should be sexual with her naked and him only wearing his boxers and a t-shirt, but neither of them seems to be aware of that.

"Are you really that insecure that you think we hugged and danced around the room the moment you were gone because we finally got rid of you?"

Jazz makes as if to give a snappy reply, but Bella shushes him with a gentle finger to his lips.

"You have no fucking idea how much moving just now hurt me. You owe me some honest answers."

He frowns slightly, then cranes his neck so he can catch a look at her backside. Unnecessarily, as her boobs bear enough marks of their own, if mostly fainter ones, and his true intent becomes obvious when he lightly slaps her ass. Bella winces, but looks more pissed at him for trying to change the topic than at him causing her some moderate level of discomfort.

"Jazz?"

"What? You know you like it."

Her huff is frustrated enough to sober him up. When she sits back on her haunches, bringing distance between them while she settles on his thighs, he seems to realize how serious she is. As is usual when they are having a heart to heart like this, they both ignore me. They don't seem to mind the fact that while I'm just outside of touching distance, I'm well within ear shot.

"Yes, rationally I know you didn't spend the last twenty-four hours being happy I wasn't here. I guess, knowing you both, that you spent a lot of time not really thinking at all. But that doesn't change the fact that irrationally, I feel like maybe you should have been happy to get some alone time without me for a change."

Bella frowns, crossing her arms over her chest as she keeps scrutinizing his face, as if she could force his every feeling and thought out into the open. It certainly works well enough when she pulls that stunt on me.

"You know that just like you guys get to fuck each other when I'm not around sometimes, Edward and I end up screwing without you. So what?

It's usually a thing of impulsive horniness and opportunity, not a statement of possessiveness. We all know it happens, and I don't think any one of us is resentful when it does?"

She keeps staring at him until he shakes his head.

"I won't deny that I had a hell of a great time yesterday. We fucked a lot and it was great, we did a couple of things that I've started to miss a little, and a few more I didn't even realize I wanted to do that badly. But, quite frankly, I think the only reason I felt remotely glad you weren't around the whole time was because I didn't want to worry about you feeling weird about any of it, because I needed to let go and have not a care in the world in order for it all to feel as good as it did in the end. I would have loved to share all of it with you if I'd thought you would have appreciated it all as much as we did."

"So I'm holding you back."

He sounds petulant enough that I feel like speaking up myself now, but Bella is faster, the sadness on her face speaking louder than words.

"No, you're just not there yet. We have a great time giving you opportunity and experience enough to get there if you want to. But not once have I thought something like, 'Damn, he really needs to be gone for a day because he keeps getting in the way.' You know I don't give a shit about your delicate sensibilities; if I had wanted you gone, I would have kicked you out of the playroom myself."

It's not hard to believe her with the vehemence in her voice – not that I doubt even a single word of what she is saying – and she goes on before Jazz can interject.

"But, you see, we're not having some kind of 'I'm kinkier than thou'

competition here, or you and I would look really lame compared to Edward, anyway. Maybe I'm closer to his comfort zone than yours, but I haven't spent my whole life denying the integral parts of my sexual preferences. I raced to embrace them once I became aware of them. And you know that it's not like Edward and I are a couple who keep you as our boy toy on the side. The three of us are 'us' – equals in every sense of the word. There's no 'two plus one' in any part of the equation. I personally don't have a problem with that, seeing as I can still call you a fucking moron without being afraid I will hurt your manly feelings. Or do you require my confession of undying love for you in order to believe me?"

Jazz makes a retching sound low in his throat, then grins again, this time a real grin that even reaches his eyes.

"Only if you call me Jamie when I fuck you, and I can call you my queen."

"Ew, you're such a sick bastard!" Bella groans, then shoves on his chest when he tries to hug her close. "Let go of me!" Her words don't accomplish much, but when she utters a light groan from just

climbing off him he stops immediately. A baleful look still on her face, she moves back towards me, and then lets me pull her against my chest, spooning her again. Before Jazz can utter another remark that will likely get him another kick, Bella grabs his arm and tugs on it until he shimmies closer to her, his knee ending up bumping into mine where it's slung over Bella's calf.

"And you aren't going to add anything to that?" he asks me once he has settled against her comfortably.

"I fully agree with everything Bella just said, and would never dare to come between you in your incestuous love and insult hurling."

I wince softly as Bella's elbow meets my ribs, while Jazz chuckles on her other side.

"Which reminds me, you keep calling me a fucking moron, too!"

"Now what does that tell you about my deep feelings for you?" I tease back, smiling at his scowl.

"But I've really missed you, too."

He grumbles something under his breath but doesn't hang on to the subject any longer.

"So you both missed me. Now tell me what I've missed."

"Us, I hope," Bella snorts, poking his chest half-heartedly. He slaps his hand over the spot, uttering a groan, but his smile doesn't change.

"Sure, sure, my heart was weeping every minute of it, yadda yadda, now give me the details! Details! Jerking off to bad internet porn doesn't compare to listening to the real deal!"

I can't see her face, but the way Bella laughs she must be smirking. Instead of answering right away she slides her hand down his stomach and into his boxers. His grin grows slack when her deft motions quickly show results, but he doesn't push her away. Instead he just shimmies out of his underwear, while her hand remains wrapped around his hardening cock.

Once he's lying still again, Bella starts her brief yet candid recount of what we were up to yesterday, leaving out nothing but adding a lot about her own reactions and impressions. I'm not surprised that he takes the morning's scene in stride, but without the enthusiasm her words rekindle inside of me. As much as he doesn't seem to mind being rough with me, we all know that slapping and choking her is something he'll never be comfortable doing, but none of us has a problem with that.

When Bella gets to the part on the restaurant terrace after our dinner, her voice turns husky. I chuckle into the side of her neck when she pushes her ass repeatedly back against my hard-on. Jazz seems greatly amused by the whole thing, until Bella mentions our possible mystery encounter.

"Wait, so you have no idea if some guy just stuck his head out to see how cold it was for taking a smoke, or whether someone was watching you the entire time?"

"Nope," Bella laughs, then moves a little closer to him so she can stare directly into his eyes, forcing him to look at her. "And quite frankly, while that uncertainty would freak me the fuck out now, back

then I wouldn't have run even if he had told me to suck off a couple of strangers."

Jazz shakes his head, still bewildered, while Bella settles back against me and resumes her tale. He takes the rest of it better than I've expected, besides a few cut-off moans when she speeds up jerking him off. Despite that I'm still curious when he makes a face at both of us at the end.

"I get why you didn't want me around for roughing her up," he gripes at me, then narrows his eyes. "But why did you think you had to keep me from the rest? Beth, Charlotte, Peter and Gerard have watched me fuck people before. I don't think any of us has a problem with seeing each other's naked asses anymore."

Bella's hand drops from his cock and she rearranges herself so that she is lying on her back, able to gaze at the both of us. The look on her face is still somewhat quizzical when she turns to Jazz.

"I think I'm kind of speaking for Edward and myself when I say we assumed you'd have issues with someone's entire hand shoved up my ass?"

"I got that, yeah, but what I don't understand is why?"

It's almost comical to watch her unease turn to that frustrated kind of anger she has perfected over time, but before she can do more than open her mouth and take a deep breath, Jazz interrupts her.

"If your answer by any chance entails terms like 'too loose' or 'not tight enough anymore', you can keep it to yourself. If I remember correctly, it was you having issues with me *maybe* not approving of that half a year ago, not me actually telling you I thought you were a freak for liking to get your holes stuffed with a little extra something something."

It's moments like these when I really appreciate the kind of bond that exists between them – while I could never have said anything even remotely like that to her and lived to tell the tale, his crude remark doesn't even seem to faze her. Yet at the same time it takes the wind out of her sails. With her need for self-righteous smiting suddenly gone, Bella appears at a loss for words for a moment before she eyes me questioningly.

"I guess you never asked Jazz what he thought about fisting?"

I shake my head mutely, confirming her guess. Slowly a wide grin spreads across her face, and this time I'm the one who gets poked.

"Guess assumptions make an ass out of you, and make mine rather sore.

Or something like that. Shit, I need more sleep for conversations like this!"

"Well, at least that's cleared up now," I helpfully supply, earning a wry chuckle from Jazz, and a breathier one from Bella, cut short by a grunt of discomfort as she shifts positions.

"Hopefully. Still, I'm not only horny now, I also have a painful hard-on. You can't just leave me like this!" Jazz complains, then nudges Bella's thigh repeatedly with said evidence of his arousal. She

laughs but shakes her head.

"No, no, no, no, don't make puppy eyes at me, my wrist is about the only part of my body that doesn't hurt right now, and I know that you're asking for more than a quick hand job."

Jazz does a half-assed job at looking crestfallen, then turns to me, the comical look of hopefulness on his face making me laugh.

"And you think it's now my obligation to finish what she started just because I'm responsible for her being all banged up from yesterday?"

"Kind of, yeah. Although I was hoping you'd let me fuck your ass instead."

Not that I ever need much convincing for that, but instead of telling him, I put on a mock frown.

"Do you realize that of late you show a disconcerting penchant for fucking my ass over me fucking yours?"

"Stop being such a whiny bitch and roll over. You know you love it!"

His growl makes both me and Bella crack up, and she snorts when I raise my eyebrows in her direction.

"What? I'm just glad I'm not the only one who has to suffer what must be one of the lamest sentences ever. But if you want to, I can start a list of who is fucking whom in this house and how often. I swear, if I wasn't sure I'd dislocate my hips doing it, I'd get my strap-on and fuck you both right now!"

"Aw, poor Bella, too sore to teach her bad, bad boys a lesson?" Jazz tries to get another rise out of her, but fails miserably when she just shrugs and props her head up with her arms crossed underneath.

"Oh, wait. I can do that without even moving a single muscle. But considering that he is trying to play the strong, unfazeable guy now, Edward can't be that much better off than me. I think you should just wrestle him down and fuck that self-satisfied smirk off his face. I'll help you as much as I can."

As happens so often when they exclude me from their conversations, Bella and Jazz have reached an agreement before I can interject anything. Jazz is already up on his knees and hurling himself at me before I can protest.

His movements display little grace, as he has to crawl over Bella to get to me and somehow tear away the duvet that covers us both. Not that I feel like protesting when he grabs my shoulders and pushes me into the mattress as he climbs onto me, then leans in for a sloppy kiss that I quickly deepen.

While he has started out rather aggressively, Jazz takes his time just staying like that, before he eventually nudges me onto my left side, facing Bella, while we pushes himself flush against the length of my body along my back. I have just a moment to smile at Bella before she's on me, molding herself against my front while she kisses me just as hungrily.

I moan into her mouth when she wraps her fingers around my cock, instinctively moving closer to her. Jazz's arm is around my hip while he strokes my stomach, his lips and tongue alternating between my neck and shoulder. None of us is really in a hurry to actually get it on for real, so we stay that way, relaxing and touching each other.

Things change when Bella eventually lets me nudge her thighs apart so that I can run my hand up her inner thigh to her pussy, the contact making her moan. Jazz stills for a moment, then pushes his cock a little more decisively against my lower back, but I ignore him for now. Looking deep into Bella's half-lidded eyes, I cup her entire sex with my hand, then push just the tip of two of my fingers into her pussy, feeling her swollen labia wet and warm against my hand. She utters another moan, smiling languidly, then stretches and moves her hips into my hand, clearly wanting more.

I feel Jazz push himself up at my other side, probably so he can see what I'm doing between Bella's legs, his chuckle low beside my ear when he props his chin up on my shoulder.

"That's so hot," he observes as he watches me stroke her pussy some more, my thumb finding her clit. Bella grins up at both of us, her smile coy.

"You like? I was thinking about getting a couple more. You know, for making a setup like this more like a real restriction," she adds, then laughs softly when I tug gently on the padlock still connecting the two rings.

Jazz groans dismally, surprising both Bella and me. When he sees the looks on our faces he huffs, pushing himself off into a sitting position.

"I'm not protesting per se. But doesn't that mean I wouldn't be able to eat your pussy for another three months? You can't do that to me, Bella. You can't be that cruel!"

I wisely press myself deeper into the mattress when Jazz crawls over me, narrowly avoiding getting kicked in the process. Bella starts laughing when he moves up her body from the foot of the bed, on the way kissing and licking her calves, knees and thighs. The sound turns into a high pitched shout when he stops hovering over her pussy and blows on her clit, obviously tickling her. Shout eventually turns to moan when he lowers his head and starts tonguing her clit.

Jazz stops after a bit, grinning up at her, then looks over at me.

"As hot as it might be, it's a bit impractical right now."

Bella makes a sound between a groan and squeal when he catches the padlock between his teeth and gently pulls on it, as if to make a point.

Laughing at his antics, I reach over to the nightstand and get the small key that fits into the lock. Jazz eagerly takes it from me to undo it, then gives Bella a sidelong glance to see what she wants to do. Pushing herself up onto her elbow, she reaches over to gently run a finger down his chin, still not touching herself.

"I love it when you or Edward play with them. Just do whatever you want."

Urged on by her words Jazz sets to removing the rings, but puts them back through the piercings vertically, one through each of her labia now. Bella meanwhile turns her head to me. When she smacks her lips I get the hint and move closer, eagerly kissing her again while I pull her onto my arm so that she can rest her head on my shoulder. Her moans get louder when I run my hand up her stomach and start playing with her breast, while Jazz dives between her legs again.

In a movement typical of her, Bella eventually pushes me away, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed.

"Edward?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you going to do me a favor?"

"Anything you want."

I can already guess what she's up to when she glances from me down to where Jazz is still very enthusiastically eating her out.

"You know what would be even better than having my pussy licked like that?"

"The same while you watch me fuck him?"

Her breathy laughter somehow manages to be dirty at the same time.

"You can always read my every wish from my eyes! Just one of the reasons I love you."

Leaning into her I kiss her again, then get the lube. In the meantime, Bella shimmies upwards on the bed so that she ends up with her head and shoulders comfortably propped up on a pillow against the headboard. Now there's actually enough room at the other end of the bed so I won't fall off.

Jazz follows her, seemingly without breaking stride, and moans appreciatively when I run my hand over his naked, raised ass. So much for preferences either way with us.

My cock isn't entirely hard yet so I squirt enough lube onto my palm so I can slick up my fingers and spread him open and stroke myself at the same time. Bella's eyes stray from watching Jazz lick her to what I'm doing, idly chewing on her bottom lip. I take my time, knowing how much she loves watching me jerk off.

Finally I stop, taking my hard cock into my hand and slapping it against Jazz's ass a few times just for the hell of it. He grumbles something that neither of us understands, and makes me crack up as the sound becomes a low moan when I slowly push into him with my dick. Jazz lets out a string of profanities, muffled beyond recognition, and Bella's only answer is to grab his hair with one hand and grind her pussy into his face.

I set a slow and relaxed pace – for one I just love watching Bella writhe under Jazz's mouth, for another I am aching all over from yesterday's exertions. As much as I don't mind pain in general, feeling my thigh muscles lock up because of that strain is not something that gets me all hot and bothered.

Taking Bella's invitation for what it is, Jazz seems to increase the intensity of his ministrations because soon she is moaning constantly as she comes, one hand still gripping his hair, the other digging into the mattress. When she goes slack again it is with a glow on her face and a decisive "Ouch!" as she shifts her weight off one hip, wincing briefly.

When she pushes his head away he rests it briefly on her thigh, but Bella is not done with him yet by far. Instead of just lying back now, she starts inching down the bed until she's lying underneath Jazz, their faces almost flush with each other.

"Let me take care of that," she coos, reaching for his cock and starting to stroke it with determination. Jazz leans further over her so that it's impossible for me to see what is going on between them anymore, but when Bella sighs contently it's not hard to imagine where his cock has ended up. I speed up my own pace a bit then, making him rock forward a bit more in reaction, and get rewarded with a low moan from her in turn.

Turning his head to the side Jazz begins nuzzling Bella's jaw, then finds her lips and kisses her slowly, almost in sync with my thrusts into him. Her arms wrap around his shoulders, the hand that ends up lower on his back briefly brushing against mine there.

Watching them both like that, gentle and almost intimate between their small pants and the sounds of sloppy kissing, makes me want to draw the moment out forever, but my own need is soon too overwhelming. As I speed up, Jazz's motions become more jerky in return. Eventually he stops kissing Bella and instead rests his forehead on her shoulder, his moans and grunts half-muffled against her. She smiles at him briefly before she turns her head and looks up at me, a wry grin on her sweat-slicked face.

I hold her gaze as I speed up until it gets to be too much. My eyes fall closed, need racing through my body and wiping my mind clear of any coherent thought. I vaguely register Jazz crying out when his own orgasm drags him under, leaving us both panting heavily while Bella laughs softly.

On any other day I would just have sagged down on Jazz, dragging him onto the mattress, but I don't want to add any additional strain to Bella's already aching body so I pull out of him and push myself away. He does the same, leaving Bella lying on her back alone, her pussy and thighs sticky with their combined juices, and maybe even some of mine.

"Now that was fun!" she laughs, then crawls back up towards the headboard. She flops down onto her stomach, seemingly lifeless, and not unlike she was before Jazz came in earlier. Jazz quickly follows her but stays propped up on his side next to her, studying her exposed backside.

Yearning for more physical contact now I snuggle up to her body, resting my head on her shoulder so that I can both kiss her there and look at Jazz while I let my hand roam over her ass and back. Bella

utters a contented sigh, moving ever so slightly closer to me, at least until I poke one of the remaining welts on her left ass cheek.

"Bastard."

I let a dark chuckle be my only answer next to a pacifying kiss. Jazz finally settles down completely, mirroring my position so that we end up both cuddling Bella between us, stealing a few kisses from each other while we all calm down and relax.

Bella's breathing eventually evens out until she starts snoring slightly, making me grin as Jazz rolls his eyes. I feel myself drift off, only rousing when I feel Jazz shift so he can drape one arm halfway over my back, too.

He smirks at me when his hand drifts lower to grab my ass, but I don't react, just happy to be exactly where I am.

Chapter 38

"Can I get you anything else, or will that be all?"

Handing Raven back my signed receipt, I smile at her and shake my head.

"No, thanks. Assembling all of this and putting the new equipment through a series of stress tests should keep us busy for a while."

It's still somewhat weird, but without a doubt more relaxing, to just get a nod and my credit card back from her.

"If you change your mind, we have the scented lubes on sale until after the weekend."

"I'll remember that. Thanks," I reply, then grab the last package and carry it to my car, barely managing to close the rear hatch after I add my purchases. When I go back into the shop I see that Beth is finally done talking to the woman she has been holed up with in a corner of the café area for the last half hour. I wait until she has left the shop before I saunter over to my former mentor, hugging her before I take the seat opposite her.

"I take it everything is okay - you spent an extra twenty minutes hanging around here just to talk to me, but you still look relaxed and at ease."

"And by that do you actually mean I look like shit, just as I always do when I'm coming home after an endless shift in hell?"

Her wide grin is answer enough, and I happily accept the extra-strong espresso she hands me. Beth keeps watching me while I drain half of it way too quickly, letting the heat and sugar chase away the grogginess that threatens to overwhelm me.

"You look happy. Even if you look like crap, it's still a happy kind of crap."

I snort, then put down the cup.

"Probably because I am happy. Nothing to complain about."

"Nothing? Seriously? That sounds so boring."

Her jibe makes me laugh.

"Well, if you ask me that way, of course there are some issues. Jazz has been hounding me because I keep forgetting to put the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and tend to forget my things in the dryer. Bella insists that my snoring is driving her crazy, we always run out of milk and no one ever admits to being the one who opened the last bottle. Jazz gets bitchy at times and Bella says we act too immature for our own good. I could go on like that for days, but in the end none of that matters. Things are great."

Beth smiles and inclines her head, although I get the feeling that the milk issue in particular isn't news to her.

"Who would have thought a year ago that things would turn out this way?"

Although her words sound cordial enough, they still make me think, and I can't shake off the feeling that she's fishing for information. Holding her gaze without blinking I finally shrug, taking a sip from my coffee.

"Let's just say that on some level I always hoped it would boil down to this.

Even if I couldn't admit to myself that I wanted Jazz to be more than just my roommate back then."

"I'm sure you weren't the only one not wanting to go down that road at the time," she replies, her words and tone unfamiliarly gentle for her. I raise my eyebrows, silently urging her to elaborate, but she leaves it at a bland smile. Getting stonewalled like that by her of all people is a strange and not entirely comfortable feeling, but I guess I really can't call dibs on her as my sounding board anymore when I tell the other people in my life to go talk to her if they need someone's honest and unprejudiced opinion.

"I take it that everything turned out fine after your last visit here?"

Mentioning our scene with Bella and the others makes me grin again, and I incline my head.

"As Bella very likely already told you, no problems at all, besides Jazz being a little grumpy that we keep underestimating him."

"Yeah, I know. Eventually they grow up and you have to accept that they're not children anymore!"

"Now that's a really disturbing idea."

Beth joins in my laughter.

"And where do you see yourself five years from now?"

Snorting, I narrow my eyes at her.

"Why do I get the feeling this is turning into a job interview now?"

She shrugs, noncommittally.

"Sorry. I watched too many bad TV shows last week on my own. I'm too lazy to disguise my nosiness any other way right now."

"Fair enough," I grunt, then think about the question for a while. "I really don't know. Probably right where I am now, sipping coffee, answering seemingly harmless questions."

"You know I didn't mean it that literally."

"Actually, with you? No. But my answer stays the same. I don't think anything will change that much by then, if we're lucky."

Now she's the one waiting for me to go on, so I do.

"I don't think either of us will get tired of the other two and leave the fold."

Living together might not be easy, but by now we've managed to find our places in our very own little ecosystem, falling back into old patterns or establishing new ones. I also think that with the way things went downhill so fast before, we're all loathe to do anything that might seriously unbalance us without talking about it first. And we always manage to make good decisions together. Bella is still giving me that weird look whenever I mention children so I doubt we'll hear the pitter-patter of little feet running through the house any time before we hit thirty. And considering how unlikely it is that same-sex marriage will be legal everywhere in the country in the next years, I doubt they'll pass a bill allowing us to legalize our relationship as it is."

Beth inclines her head ruefully, her smile wry.

"Yeah, I've come to terms with officially dying an old spinster as far as the law is concerned, but that's no reason to give up hope or stop fighting. But speaking of bringing more quirky, evil bastards into this world, have you still been weirding Jazz out by whining that none of your eventual spawn will have his golden birdie locks?"

I almost choke on my coffee, then push the cup away from me before I can accidentally knock it over.

"Bella really told you that?"

Beth's grin has a definite feline quality to it now.

"Of course she did - holding her sides, tears in her eyes, while managing to look horribly grossed out at the same time."

"Ah, I know. I can be such an ass sometimes, but I can't help it - I love to try and squick them out from time to time. And there's really not much else I can say that will make them both stare at me with that look of utter, horrified disgust. I mean, I know with Jazz being sterile he can't have any kids in the first place, but I doubt that they'd think about having children together even if they were the last two people on Earth. Guess it serves me right that he's already threatened to teach our future offspring every stupid thing he can think of?"

"Naturally, but considering your work schedule, he'll likely also be the one teaching them every useful thing he can think of, too. You should be glad about that. Although PTA meetings are bound to be a blast."

As always, the knowledge that my career will cut deeply into family time saddens me, but she's right. Just as I'm relieved now that Bella has someone to be around when I'm gone for days at a time – even

if that still bothers me, and will likely only get worse if we have kids – I know that our family, as it is, will be a warm and nurturing environment for anyone to grow up and live in.

The last part of her remark turns my smile into a grin again, and I snort.

"I already pity the unlucky bitch or bastard who calls Bella's righteous wrath down upon them. When she was out with Rose and her baby last week and someone looked at them in what she thought was a condescending way, she got right in their face. I don't want to think about how much worse it will be when it's her own brood that's under scrutiny. She really doesn't suffer fools gladly anymore."

"Did she ever? I still remember a time when you didn't have the balls to confess your undying love to her because you thought she'd laugh at such a mushy sentiment, particularly when admitted after the mutual destruction of a bottle of tequila."

Although it has only been a year, thinking back to a time when I couldn't just walk up to Bella and kiss her, knowing that she felt the same for me as I did for her, is almost impossible to fathom now.

"She tried. Hard, I think, to live up to the standards she set for herself in her attempt to find her place in the world, only to realize she wanted the exact opposite of them. And did you lace my coffee with something? I sound like I'm reciting bad prose or something."

"Nope, that's all you, my dear. And, as the medical professional of the two of us, you probably know better than I do that it hails from sleep deprivation and you being so full of yourself all the time."

I accept what is by her standards a gentle reprimand in silence. Her next question makes an answer to it unnecessary, anyway.

"Do you still beat yourself up over what you did? Your moment of weakness, probably the closest you'll ever come to 'cheating' in your life?"

She even does air quotes with her fingers. I don't even have to think very long about how to answer that.

"I'll never stop trying to make it up to her, even if she already forgave me a long, long time ago. It helps that she agrees with me that what happened was in a way a catalyst for us to become what we are now, too."

"Yeah, it's always convenient when in hindsight things just miraculously fall into place, and you can forget the months of whining in between."

"I didn't whine that much!" I complain, then feel like bashing my head against the table when her toothy smile tells me I confirmed that yes, I did indeed whine.

"Okay. Yes, so maybe I have a certain penchant for drama queen behavior.

Someone has to be the girl in our happy little family after all," I gripe back in a vain attempt at damage control.

"So true. And you did a good job letting Bella find her backbone while you were losing yours. The lesson in humility certainly served you well, too. You can be an awfully cocky bastard when you want to be."

"Jazz usually says 'insufferable,' in case you were wondering."

Beth snorts, then briefly looks away before her eyes settle on my face again.

"How's he coping with the whole situation? It can't have been easy for him to come back on his knees, begging for forgiveness, when he's even less inclined to show weakness than you are. Bella still isn't convinced that he's honest when he claims he doesn't care about the things you do with and to her. You should know that."

"I know. She keeps nagging me about it. She doesn't realize that, just like he had so many issues accepting that she grew up, she's having the same problem accepting the changes in him. And yes, the fact that I sometimes feel like I'm loving a set of mirror images is weirding me out."

"Aw, come on. You can't hold that against them. I'm not sure they even remember a time when they weren't co-dependent on each other, and hating everyone who tried to keep them apart. Ever wondered just why Jazz seemed so happy when he talked you into jumping into the breach after Bella and that guy she was dating broke up, or why she hates that Alice girl so much? They kept Bella and Jazz apart while you just pulled them closer together again. If you ask me, anything short of loving and wanting to fuck them both would have forced you into a lot of uncomfortable and weird situations for the rest of your life, if you had just stuck with Bella."

I have to admit, I've never quite seen it like that, but as usual Beth is spot on. One might think that after the many wise conversations I've had with her, I should be used to it by now, but she will always remain my sage, no-nonsense mentor, in one way or another.

"Then I'm glad it only took me half a year to get my head out of my ass. It's more fun having something else shoved up there anyway."

"You're such a hopeless romantic! No wonder Bella and Jazz both fell for the amazingly sweet things you say!"

We both laugh at that, until companionable silence settles over us.

"Any chance that the three of you might want to come over for a scene or two any time soon? I can't help but notice that whenever we talk about sex, Bella will sooner or later bring up the fact that she's living in sausage-fest central with a dire lack of tits and cunt."

"You know I'm game for almost anything. You should also know that while Jazz would have no problem coming to a play party, I don't really see him wanting to have to deal with anyone except Bella and me in closer contact."

He's scared of you, even if that doesn't make any sense, and I don't think his confidence could take the extra scrutiny yet."

My remark makes her draw her forehead into a frown.

"You really think he'd be self-conscious just because I was around? He should know that I wouldn't do anything to him or talk him into doing anything that he doesn't want to do."

"I don't think it's that. It's hard to explain, but he seems happy where he is right now. With us, included as an equal, loved and cherished, but without any responsibilities or anyone having any expectations of him. He obviously likes to top in a scene, but he doesn't want to be a Dom, and I don't think that will change much. You know that not all of us get off on having to care for someone else like that."

"Don't even dare to speak another word. Last time I checked, I was the one telling you it was okay to be into power play but that it wasn't necessarily a prerequisite, just like everything else. Different folks, different strokes, right?"

"Yes, Mistress."

I get an eye roll for that, and I'm disappointed when she doesn't even try to slap me playfully. It's moments like this when I miss what we had years ago. Try as they might sometimes, neither Bella nor Jazz will ever come even close to the way she made me feel when I was kneeling before her.

That is a different part of me and my life, over now, and I wouldn't change what I have for the past, not even for one second.

"Speaking of things that don't concern me but interest me terribly, how is Rose doing with her kid? Last time I called her she sounded incredibly tired, but I guess that's to be expected."

"She's doing okay, I think. Tired, yes. Happy to rant for hours about how everything falls to her and complain about how Emmett manages to shirk his duties at a father in the most heinous ways, yes, but you should see how she smiles whenever he's home and carrying their kid around. They're so sweet it makes my teeth ache."

Beth nods but I can tell she doesn't buy my jibe, although she's too good to rub it in that, contrary to the future mother of my children, I can't wait for the day when Bella tells me she's pregnant. I've never quite understood why.

Maybe it's because part of me resents growing up without ever really knowing my father, despite eating breakfast with him four days a week for years, and I want the chance to do a better job of it. I know a couple of people I'm not related to or in love with who I like better than him. And it's not like the relationship that my father and I have is any worse than what eighty percent of people have with their parents. It's just not what I want with my own children.

"I guess I should go home now. Who knows what Bella and Jazz will come up with if I stay away too long? I wouldn't put it past them to eat all the food or start drinking without me."

"That would really be such a shame."

We hug before I leave. The drive home is uneventful, the usual weekend traffic not yet in full swing. Leaving the boxes in the car for later, I just grab the two bags containing Bella's plants, then walk up the path to the front door.

I don't know why it even surprised me that just in time for our anniversary, my mother suddenly turned up on our doorstep, and taking a look around the living room of our condo proclaimed that it was really getting crowded.

And she just happened to have hung on to a certain house on the other side of town that I made her promise to sell when Bella and I moved to the condo. Apparently, lying to your son is fully acceptable 'when you've always known he would change his mind eventually.' Of course we didn't protest when she offered us to just switch, claiming she could sell the condo a lot easier than a nice house in the suburbs. So it came to be that, somehow, we've ended up exactly where we started a year ago, in at least one sense of the meaning.

Laughter and casually thrown insults greet me when I walk in. I kick off my shoes in the small foyer before I walk on into the kitchen. Every bit of available counter space is full of boxes, most of them half unpacked, and I have to kick two out of the way so I can get into the living room. The achingly familiar room still looks weird as the couch and TV are the the only pieces of furniture in it right now. Bella and Jazz both look up from where they are sprawled on the sofa, too lazy or tired to get up.

"One ficus and one yucca coming up. Where shall I put them?"

Bella gestures towards the glass door leading out onto the lawn.

"Over there. We need to get the other stuff unpacked first before I can find a good place for them."

After depositing the plants where she told me to, I walk up to the couch, first kissing her, then Jazz. Or that was the plan, badly executed when Bella doesn't let go but pulls on my shoulders until I let myself be dragged onto the sofa myself, ending up between them.

"I have no idea why you're looking so tired. You didn't spend the last two days packing and unpacking boxes," Jazz teases me as he leans closer, grinning brightly.

"Yeah, I know. I'm such a slacker. Saving lives doesn't come close to the work of you two upstanding furniture movers. Which reminds me, did you finally decide which of the two back rooms you want to make into our bedroom, and which is going to be the spare?"

Bella snorts and starts laughing, snuggling close to my other side.

"Nope. Jazz keeps insisting that his former room is better because the sun doesn't shine into your eyes at the ass crack of dawn and it also has the larger adjacent bathroom. I keep insisting that I don't want to move into his previous den of iniquity. We're at a stalemate, and because we couldn't decide, the new mattress is right now blocking most of the hallway. Your vote gets to be the deciding one."

"Why me? Just so you can then both be mad at me because you think I've made the wrong choice?"

Their almost identical grins make me laugh, and I let my head fall against the back of the couch just so I don't have to look at either of them.

"I really don't give a fuck. As far as I'm concerned, the only room I'm in charge of decorating is the attic upstairs. The rest is up to you."

"You can't do that! Don't be such a pussy just because you're afraid Jazz will keep bitching like a little girl when you make the right choice."

"And what, dear Bella, is better about Edward's former room than mine? My room has the better fixtures for lights and electronic equipment, and there's even a specially built nook in the back for a small freezer!"

"Which is the reason why I think it's better equipped to be the office, not the bedroom! I so need a door between where I sleep and where you keep your porn collection. Your computer isn't coming into the bedroom, either."

"It's not porn, it's my *World of Warcraft* collectibles collection!"

Thankfully the sound of the doorbell saves me from having to contribute to that conversation. By the time I return with the pizza boxes, Bella and Jazz have agreed to disagree yet again. Too lazy to go hunting for plates somewhere in the boxes in the kitchen, I just keep the pizza boxes on my lap as I settle down, momentarily feeling like a zookeeper when the other two zero in on the food.

After the pizza is gone and tempers have died down due to imminent food coma, Bella switches on the TV. I soon feel myself drift off as exhaustion finally claims me. I know that soon enough I will have to get up and help the other two unpack, very likely bringing their combined wrath down upon me because I still don't give a shit about where we set up our bedroom, and or whether the books are put on the shelves in the right order.

The only thing I do care about is that I'm living together with the two most wonderful people in the world, who I love more than life itself and who feel the same way about me. I know we still have a lot to work out, and that not every day will be as peaceful and filled with inconsequential squabbles as today. I know I could never choose one of them over the other, and I know they will never force me to.

I keep hearing people tell me that their wife or husband completes them –

for us that means having not one but two people who do that job. While Bella and I have been happy together, I know now just how much was missing from our lives the entire time that Jazz wasn't in them. Just the same, I can't imagine that Jazz and I could live together without Bella.

She's the glue that keeps us together, and the voice of reason when we're both being pig-headed. The fact that the bond between them is far from being romantic, but stronger than anything else I've ever seen, only seems to complete and stabilize our triangle.

But right now, my life is perfect. And come what may, I know the three of us will never stop working to keep it that way.

THE END.