



# After Hours

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** Some lessons hit harder in the dark...

Romily Sargent is hiding from her nasty ex in a marina where no one would ever think to look for her. She wants to heal—but she keeps running into the gorgeously forbidding Viking from the scary local gym. And she wants things she shouldn't... especially when she sees him with other women.

But what he wants from her is total surrender—and Romily isn't sure she dares.

Zachary London never thought the pretty, broken one with scared eyes would turn out to be the woman he's been looking for all this time—the one who can take what he dishes out and return it, not just chase him around to get off. He's learned his lesson when it comes to getting too involved. That's why he uses The Club app to keep things hot and uncommitted.

But Romily reminds him who he really is and what he truly wants—if he can show her that the kind of submission he wants from her might free them both...

**Total Pages (Source):** 47

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## Chapter One

He was there again that night, like something the dusk called up from the bay and let loose upon the gritty, crumbling city.

Calamitous villain or savior, it was hard to tell.

The man was built like some kind of modern-day Viking, what with the dark beard and those icy blue eyes. He was also one of those sculpted, muscled, huge men her ex-husband had liked to sneer at and call CrossFit junkies like that was something to be embarrassed about when he had liked to prance around in a lot of cycling apparel while doing very little actual cycling.

Though Joseph had known better than to sneer about anything where any of those much larger men could hear him, of course.

Romily had seen the man before. Her latter-day Viking. She had made a point of it, in fact.

Her little hideaway-from-the-whole-world boat was docked in a small, weathered marina near Brooklyn Basin in Oakland, and there were only a handful of places in the area that weren't entirely overcome by the relentless press of the streets.

Personally, Romily liked not getting shot at when she needed a few things from the self-consciously precious little market nearby. It existed solely to cater to the fancy new high rises in the Brooklyn Basin development, all boasting some of the most beautiful views imaginable of San Francisco across the water at astronomically high

prices. She even liked the absurdly uppity prices at the market—the fact of them, the optimism they suggested about the clientele, not actually paying them—and that the little boutique grocery had about seventy-five varieties of Boba, every alternative milk imaginable, and yet shockingly few actual necessities. She liked the strangeness of this new life of hers more and more—or so she told herself daily, like a mantra—so far away from what her small and claustrophobic life in Walnut Creek had become. Walnut Creek, which never had been as close to San Francisco as the people who lived there liked to pretend, and where Joseph had made certain that any friends she might have had lost touch with her completely.

He'd made certain of it but she also hadn't fought it, because surrendering to her ever-increasing isolation was easier than explaining why she was the way she had to be to survive him.

The market was one of the surprising rewards she'd found for making an entire new life for herself, unconnected to anyone or anything she'd known before, in a place no one who'd ever met her would think to look for her.

Another was him. The man.

Her bearded, mouthwateringly well-cut Viking who was usually in what she'd originally thought was a garage, thanks to its roll-up metal door covered with the expected spray-painted tags. It sat between a bizarre sort of down-market seafood restaurant that did a surprising amount of business, given the often questionable neighborhood there on the Embarcadero, and a seedy though not wholly terrifying dive bar. The bar came alive only late at night and often left its patrons worse for wear as well as targets for petty thieves as they stumbled off along the waterfront path that stretched all the way to Jack London Square.

And it turned out it wasn't a garage. Romily had found that out one very early morning when she couldn't sleep and so was out walking. An activity that was not as

relaxing as she'd hoped, given what lurked in the shadows beneath the palm trees here, but it was a lot better than her nightmares.

She'd heard the noise before she'd understood what she was hearing, odd metallic crashes and a kind of growling through the morning fog, making her wonder if she'd been about to encounter another monster she would have to run from.

Or, more worryingly, if maybe it was time she ran toward the monster instead, because there was something almost exhilarating in the thought of choosing it?—

But there were no monsters. Not the kind that chased her, anyway.

It was a gym.

One of those gyms with black floors and horrible, shouty music, filled with terrifying equipment like bags hanging from chains like some kind of fitness abattoir—without a single soothing elliptical machine or smoothie counter to be seen.

What it had was him.

Sometimes other big, scary men were there too. They all looked like they were trying to make themselves into his clones, but never quite got there. There were a lot of bearded, tattooed, grim-eyed men in that dark little place, all crashing weights and grunting noises, but only he seemed to disturb the air when he moved.

And that was hard to do in this part of Oakland, where disturbance was just regular, daily background noise.

Those disturbances were why Romily didn't love leaving her boat. Well. One reason, anyway. If she could, she'd stay hidden away in the marina night and day, but even someone who wanted to stay anonymous and forever unfound had to go out

sometimes.

So every day, Romily made herself leave the marina and walk around, because that was what people were supposed to do, and she was trying her best to do that. To people like she really was a person and not just the ruined, bombed-out shell of a person her ex had made her.

And not only when the nightmares had her waking up choking again.

After that first morning, in the fog, she'd made it a point to learn the hours of the gym—and they weren't posted anywhere she could see. Apparently you had to have a beard and a certain grimness to you to work it out.

Or you had to live nearby, like Romily.

By now she had managed to see him at almost all times of day.

There was usually a t-shirt situation but on really good days, he was shirtless. Curling things. Slamming things. Sometimes running with all his sleek muscles on display, not to mention the kind of tattoos that had always fascinated her, all over his skin like spells and incantations. Sometimes at night she would lie in her berth and trace the patterns she saw inked into his skin all over her own body.

Sometimes she would slide her hands between her legs and let her imagination go wild?—

Tonight, though, he surprised her.

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Shocked her, even.

Because tonight she saw him when she hadn't expected it. When she wasn't looking for him, for a change.

He was walking out on the commons—the public park behind the old Port of Oakland building that offered dreamy views over the estuary and further on toward San Francisco. He was just there, like he wasn't a gorgeous, terrifying warrior of a man, out in the falling dusk. As if he was normal instead of extraordinary, out here in public surrounded by regular people, and Romily didn't know what to do with herself.

She barely knew who she was. She almost swallowed her own tongue. She was certainly holding her breath.

She froze, right in the middle of a stream of people, which was a good way to get trampled.

But she couldn't move.

It was a small miracle that there was a knot of skateboarders between them. Not that he would recognize her. Why would he? But she was sure he'd notice someone frozen solid and gaping at him.

It was a kind of miracle to see him like this. Just... out.

No crashing weights or music ripe with full-throated bellows and dark, hot baselines designed to disturb.

Just a powerfully built man prowling his way down a walkway.

He was mesmerizing.

He wasn't wearing the things he usually did in the gym. He was in jeans that made a grand feast out of the powerful muscles of his quads and ass. He wore a black Henley that only emphasized his outrageously cut arms. He wore a dark knitted beanie like every other bearded dude in the East Bay, but he was nothing like any of them.

Something about him made her bones hum and her body ache.

Like a good fever, if that was a thing.

Long after he'd walked off, back to whatever life he must lead and she should probably wonder about that at some point, Romily stayed frozen still. She didn't move even when the skateboarders looped all around her like she was a new obstacle for them to conquer.

She didn't move for so long that when she did, she felt stiff and something like sore.

In her chest, where the heart she'd written off as defective suddenly decided to start beating again, too hard and too jagged.

Hours later, instead of walking straight to the marina entrance and hurrying down the dock to the safety of her boat, she looped around on the walkway instead. She told herself she was simply enjoying a nightly walk—not something she normally indulged in this far from dawn, not least because it could get a bit nutty out here in the dark— but that wasn't entirely true.

Romily was deliberately taking another pass near the gym.

Just in case, she told herself.

Just in case what? she asked herself a bit scornfully. He's standing around outside a gym on a Friday night? Just to see if he can cause a commotion?

Not likely.

When she headed toward his gym, she saw that the garage door was closed. Not a surprise.

That there was a light on inside, though, was. She could see it through the cracks in the small, barred windows in the rolling garage door. Just a hint of light, peeking out into the dark.

Romily wasn't usually out this late, or for so long, but a lot of other people were because it was a Friday. And the weather was beautiful. There had been fleets of kayaks in the estuary all day. The restaurant was packed and loud. There were even people waiting in line to get into the dive bar.

She had gone out tonight as a test. There had been music in the park, so she'd gone over to listen. Once she'd stuck herself that was. She'd watched people dance. Sing. Roller blade through the evening. She'd made herself sit there in a crowd, like normal people did, even in this part of beleaguered Oakland.

But all the while she'd daydreamed about him.

Now she wanted nothing but to get to her boat and hide away again, so she could lie in her cozy berth and go over every detail of his pecs straining beneath that Henley, then make up some delicious scenarios to go with it, but that light taunted her.

Romily made her way past the crowd outside the bar, then did something she'd never



done before. She didn't overthink it. She had a crazy little idea and she went with it. Instead of walking her usual path past the front of the gym and on to the marina's gated entrance, she slipped into the alley between it and the bar.

She felt breathless. Audacious.

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Like the girl she'd almost been before Joseph had gotten his hooks in her.

Thinking about Joseph was galvanizing, because he would hate this. All of this. That she was in this part of Oakland. That she lived on a boat of questionable seaworthiness. That she was having whole thoughts and a life without his permission and direction.

Not to mention that she noticed other men at all, much less one who looked like a Viking god.

He would make her pay for all of that. She knew that all too well. She'd lived it for longer than she liked to think about—

But Joseph wasn't here.

So Romily walked faster and with more determination into the dark, until the shadows swallowed her up.

And when she got farther still, she saw that there were stairs that led up to a higher floor above the gym. But beneath it was another door, with an actual name on it: LONDON'S. With a list of hours and a phone number etched beneath.

Like it was a real gym after all, not just a home away from home for Vikings lost in time.

But Romily didn't care about any of that, not at the moment, because she could see through the glass.

He was there. Right there, in what looked like some kind of front desk area, though she could barely concentrate on the details.

Because he wasn't doing paperwork.

He had a blonde woman bent over that desk and he was fucking her.

Hard.

## Chapter Two

That was what he was doing.

Fucking.

There was no other word for it, clearly dirty and rough and hot, even from out here in the alley.

He had the blonde spread out over that desk before him, face down. He gripped her hip with one of his big, big hands. The other was a fist in her hair so she was arched back even as she was splayed before him. He was standing between her legs, slamming himself into her again and again and again?—

Romily jerked back, feelingscalded.

Her heart exploded in her chest. Her ribs ached. She could feel the drag of breath in her lungs like some kind of rough and dirty caress all its own.

It had been nearly six months since she'd disappeared from her old life. A year since she'd known she had to find a way to do it, that her marriage really was that dire—and that there was no hope she could change it. Four years since she'd met and

married Joseph in a wild, exciting whirlwind of barely six weeks, certain they were soulmates—only to find herself sitting in a hotel room on her wedding night with a nasty, frightening stranger, wondering how she'd gotten it all so wrong.

She'd spent the first month of freedom in hiding, second-guessing herself, and reading up on men like Joseph. Of which, to her dismay, there were far too many. The good news was that she'd stopped questioning herself. She saw a therapist twice a week online. She thought a lot about what reclaiming her life would look like, assuming she was ever ready for that. Assuming this wasn't already it.

There were huge parts of her that would be perfectly happy to stay safe and dry and alone in her boat forever.

But this was the first time in a long, long while that she really and truly felt alive.

As if looking through that window was the same as plugging herself into an electrical socket.

It took her a long, dizzy sort of moment to remember where she was.

When she did, it was in a deep horror, because she was lurking.

In an alley.

Like a creep.

She could hear the music from inside the bar next door, just a heavy baseline that seemed unconnected to any song she'd ever heard. Romily knew she was lucky that she hadn't been seen. That she could walk away right now and think about what she'd done when she got home. Maybe question why she'd been skulking around in a dark alley and spying on a man she'd never met.

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Go back to the boat, now, she ordered herself. And in the morning, call your therapist. This is not what she meant when she suggested low-impact social activities.

But she didn't move.

For a few, almost painful breaths, she stayed where she was—plastered against the rough, uneven surface of the wall beside the door and under the stairs. She knew that she needed to hurry and leave before he saw her. Or before someone else did and called the cops.

But when she did move, she didn't walk away like a normal person.

Instead, she snuck another peek.

It was like she couldn't help herself.

Inside, the situation had changed. The woman was kneeling down, her hands on the man's thighs. She looked as if she was begging him. Pleading for something, and somehow, Romily knew what she wanted.

It was what Romily wanted too.

More of that big, thick cock of his that she was sure she would dream about forever.

The way he had pounded it into the blonde, so deep and sure, keeping up that relentless rhythm she could feel in her own pussy. Like he was doing it to her.

God, but she wished he was.

And there was something else.

Something that made everything in her tight and hot.

The woman was completely naked. Hewas not.

Romily understood, despite not being able to hear what they were saying to each other, that he had made the woman come, because of course he had. He didn't look like the kind of lover who would see only to himself, and besides, the blonde looked flushed. Glassy-eyed.

Now, clearly, she was begging for the chance to return the favor.

And Romily didn't understand what was happening in her own body, then. Whyshewas so flushed too. Whyherbreastsached, her nipples tight and hard. Why she could feel her pussy soften with a rush of damp heat.

Romily couldn't have moved if she tried—but she didn't try.

She stayed where she was. It would have taken half of the Oakland PD to tear her away from the door.

Inside, he was leaning against the wall, the woman at his feet. His arms were crossed over the expanse of his chest. He held the blonde's pleading gaze.

Only when the woman looked desperate did he raise one dark brow. She subsided, though Romily could see the way she shivered.

Then, slowly, he nodded.

And Romily watched, spellbound and dry-mouthed, as the woman reached up, hands shaking, and pulled the man's enormous cock out of his jeans.

He was even bigger than he'd looked while he was buried deep inside the blonde. So big that Romily felt her own mouth drop open as she tried to imagine what the woman felt, as she tried to take him in her mouth, to fit him all in.

The stretch. The thick fullness of him. The taste.

The rough masculine scent of him, everywhere.

God, she was so turned on she was shaking, out here in the dark shadows of the alley with only that insistent baseline for company.

Inside, the man shifted, wrapping his hand in the woman's hair once more. He put his other hand to her jaw.

And then, with a certain tender brutality, he began to fuck the woman's face.

There was no doubt that he was controlling everything. The depth, the angle.

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Once again, he was relentless. The pace he set was demanding, hard.

Glorious, Romily thought.

And she found herself squirming around, pressing her thighs together, working for that same white hot glimmering finish she could feel the couple inside were racing toward.

He gripped the woman's head and fucked her harder. He had to be halfway down her throat.

He pounded into her, then went even faster, gripping the blonde's head close as his gorgeous body stiffened.

Outside, Romily bit her own hand and pressed her thighs tight as she, too, exploded.

But when she opened her eyes, the man wasn't looking down at the woman who still had his big dick in her mouth, her throat working to drink him all down.

He was looking straight at Romily through the glass, his blue eyes so intense she felt a jolt go through her and came again.

Even harder than before.

And then, too late, she ran.

Chapter Three



Zachary London knew exactly who he'd caught at his door, playing voyeur games.

Not her name.

Not her story or the whole of whatever situation had brought her to the neighborhood—and there was always a story around here. There were as many artists as bums, as many people hiding as finally living the way they wanted in this part of Oakland, but it was often hard to tell the difference between the two.

Still, he knew her.

He knew she had dark, glossy hair that she usually wore in a long braid and tossed over her shoulder. He knew she liked smashing a battered trucker hat on her head and pulling it down low on her face. Presumably to hide, when all it really did was draw attention to her mouth. Full lips, never smiling, but enough to set up shop in his head.

Not to mention his dick.

It was later that same night and he shouldn't be getting hard again like he hadn't come a few times already. He'd thanked his date for a decent scene and sent her on her way. But all Zachary could think about was the woman he'd seen watching them. And how easy it would have been for him not to look up when he had.

That wouldn't have worked for him at all.

Because now he knew that she was a little twisted, his lost little bird.

Truth was, Zachary liked a specific kind of sex, delivered in a specific kind of way. It wasn't that he didn't like face-fucking a pretty woman, because of course he did, and the date he'd had tonight was particularly good at handling a man with a large cock.

But he was wired for more of that power exchange, not just disconnected scenes.

He wanted more—even though he wasn't one to allow himself too many indulgences. Still, his cock got hard just thinking about it, and when he did, it wasn't the blonde he saw.

It was her.

It was those wide amber eyes he'd seen staring back at him earlier, flooded with that wild heat.

"Just a little twisted," he found himself saying out loud.

He stood at the window in his apartment above the gym, in the building that was the first thing he'd ever fully owned in the world. The first thing that was his after the way he'd grown up and the price he'd paid for that. This building that he'd found in ruins and had built into something strong and lasting, that had possibly been the reason he'd imagined he should involve himself in more renovation projects.

It had taken longer than it probably should have, but he'd cut himself off from renovations by now. Of any description.

He was old enough and wise enough now to let people handle their own restorations. It was better that way. He knew that from long and painful experience.

And yet Zachary kept playing out what had happened earlier again and again in his head. His date. A decent fuck. A better blow-job.

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Then that face at the window, making him come ten times harder than expected.

But it washer.

It was really her.

He had to admit that she'd surprised him. And he wasn't easily surprised, especially around here. He'd learned the hard way how to read people, but he hadn't seen his kind of twisted in her. It had never occurred to him that she might be exactly what he shouldn't be looking for.

Now he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Zachary had clocked her not long after she'd moved into the shittiest boat in the marina, a floating piece of shit bathtub that somehow hadn't sunk yet. His apartment looked over the small marina, tucked up on the water below him, with the same view of Coast Guard Island and Alameda beyond. He knew most of the people who lived there by sight, though this wasn't any Mister Rogers type of shit. This was the kind of place where neighbors made sure never to do more than nod in passing, a quiet indication that they knew who was supposed to be here and who was a problem.

There were prettier marinas in other places in the broader Bay Area. Marinas with shopping, high-end restaurants, even art studios and other office spaces to rent for various small fortunes. This one had none of those amenities. This was a place folks could pay very little, relatively, for waterfront property in one of the most beautiful—and expensive—places in the world.

He had always admired the people who made it work. The boats down below were more houseboats than pleasure boats, usually built out on trawlers or small craft frames. Their owners tailored their vessels to their own wishes and fitted them out to the best of their abilities. The same way Zachary had done with this building, now that he thought about it.

Though his home was less likely to sink in the next big storm.

The inevitable earthquake, on the other hand, wouldn't play favorites. But that was part of the fun of living in California.

He was pretty sure he'd seen her move in some months back, standing right where he was now. And he was one hundred percent sure that whenever he'd seen her first, he'd ordered himself to look away, fast.

Because Zachary had a problem where broken creatures were concerned. A soft spot, of sorts, but he knew better than to indulge it. He'd learned that lesson too often and too well.

That said, he also knew the exact moment she'd laid eyes on him.

He'd watched her nearly miss a step, out there on that palm-lined walk toward the old port building. He'd seen her soft eyes widen. He'd thought she was too skinny for her body, and that it was the kind of skinny that came from fear and tribulation, not from any kind of vanity or fashion addiction.

A broken bird, he'd thought, fluttering around a part of Oakland that everyone claimed was up and coming... though he hadn't seen too much of that optimism materialize just yet. Not outside the new, fancy housing developments, anyway.

He knew better than to pay any attention to yet one more lost soul in a city that ate

souls, spit them out, and crushed their remains into dust—and that was on a good day.

And especially not one who came in a package like hers.

All that dark hair he itched to dig his hands into from day one. Those sad amber eyes. That sulky mouth that would look spectacular wrapped around his cock. The skinny body he could visualize healthy and curvy the way it should be, and wouldn't that be a pretty little toy for a man like him to mess up in all his favorite dirty ways?—

But Zachary didn't fucking need any more kryptonite.

He'd seen her earlier tonight, looking like a ghost in the park, so unnaturally still in a swirl of the usual punk ass skateboarders. And then he'd looked up in the middle of a scene to find her there, watching him come.

There was no pretending he wasn't hard again now, remembering.

Or that she hadn't come with him, because he knew what dirty need and wanton hunger looked like on a woman's face.

That it had been all over her face was going to sit heavy on him for some time.

He knew that, too.

He braced his hands on the big window, glowering down at the boats that rocked gently on the water in the marina far below. It had been a nice night but now the fog had come in, blocking the view of San Francisco in the distance, and he figured he'd have to be dead before he got over looking at the prettiest city in the world. He'd been born and raised on the other side of the city, in hills that smelled of eucalyptus and moss. Sometimes he thought he must dream that he was back there, because he'd wake with that crisp, clean scent in his nose like he was a kid again.

But he wasn't.

Truth was, he hadn't had the opportunity to be much of a kid then, but memory was a messy thing when it wanted to be. He knew the kind of tricks it liked to play.

He only went over to the Marin County town he'd grown up in—back when there were still pockets of working class folks set in with all the millionaires and trust fund types—to do his duty these days. There was nothing for him there but bad memories. His mother couldn't get over what he'd done on her behalf and he wasn't a man who entertained the same argument twice or apologized more than once.

Besides. He wasn't sorry.

He told himself that he was not going to mess up his whole fucking life again, this time because he wanted to get his hands all over a woman who might as well have trouble branded on her forehead.

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Maybe she did, under that cap.

Trouble was, Zachary was a little too good at fixing the broken things he encountered.

When they were pretty women, built just the way he liked, he rarely held himself back from fucking them, too.

The fucking wasn't the dangerous part. He could usually tell at a glance which women were open to the games he liked to play and he didn't waste his time with soft vanillas who thought they wanted some dark mixed in with all their sweet. He liked what he liked. Vanilla wasn't it.

No matter how bored he was with the same old scenes these days.

Even if he'd been tempted to try, he knew better. Vanilla girls had a bad habit of thinking they wanted what he had to offer until they got a taste, and then they freaked. If he had a dollar for every soft little thing who thought she was tough and made it clear she thought she could handle him—only she really, really couldn't—he would have an international franchise by now instead of the one gym.

He'd long ago stopped bothering with them.

There were more than enough women who were twisted just like he was. They were more his speed.

Because he didn't just like to fix them, or fuck them. He always ended up getting all

up in their lives, too, thinking he could clean up that mess—because it was so often a mess. He always made the mistake of thinking that he could exert his will in every direction instead of tending to himself.

And it always went the same way. The pretty, lost little toys he found always bloomed under his hands, but they didn't offer much care in return. They were good at taking. They were great at coming. They were selfish as fuck, and he always ended up emptier and grimmer for it.

But he was reformed now. He taught anyone who came to his gym how to protect themselves, no more and no less. He was no one's hero and damn sure no champion.

A stint in prison would do that to a man. It was on him that it had taken so long after his release to learn the right lessons.

Zachary pushed back from the window, deciding he would go for a long, hard run along the Bay Trail. Always extra spicy at night, but nothing scared him much these days. He couldn't tell if that was because he was that powerful—or that numb.

Maybe the real truth was that he was afraid he knew the answer.

Still, he took one last look at the marina before he went. And stopped moving. Because he could see her, climbing off her boat and onto the dock with her head down, some kind of hoodie on, and her hands shoved in her pockets.

Zachary knew immediately that she was having the same kind of night that he was, and she was heading out to walk it off.

Like the dumbass she was. A guaranteed mess. There were so many red flags it was a goddamned parade.



And tonight he was not in the mood to shadow her and make sure she was okay, the way he'd done more than once before and left her none the wiser.

Tonight he had other things on his mind.

And red flags had always been his favorite.

So he headed out, jogging down to the alley and rounding the building, making it to the gated entrance of her marina right as she was coming up the walkway from the docks. He waited for her to close the gate behind her. He watched her look—involuntarily, he thought, if he was any kind of judge of people's expressions and as it happened, he was—down the line of buildings like she was looking for lights in the gym.

He could have stepped out of the shadows. He didn't.

Instead, he watched her blow out a breath, shake her head slightly, and then turn toward the old Port building.

"Hey," he said then, moving out of the shadows. "Don't you think you're forgetting something?"

He could tell she knew exactly who was talking to her before she turned. And her amber eyes were wide when she swiveled back around, confirming it. Zachary had the great pleasure of watching her cheeks stain red.

"Um," was what she said.

He moved closer, not sure if she would run—but she didn't. And maybe that was a disappointment, he could admit, because he was already so hard he ached.

“Name?”

He didn't really ask her. It was an order.

And he watched her eyes change. He watched her cheeks get redder. He could see the way she shifted on her feet.

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Not that he'd had any doubt. But she was proving him right just the same.

"Romily," she said. "Romily Sargent."

It sounded like a song to him. He'd never heard that name before, but he thought it suited her.

He understood then that he was going to wreck himself on this woman. That it had always been leading straight here. That this had been completely inevitable since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her months ago.

There was a kind of liberation in accepting it.

"Zachary," he told her.

"Zachary London?"

She said it like she was putting puzzle pieces together. "You can read."

He watched her swallow, hard. "I want to apologize—" she began.

"Oh, baby girl, it's way too late for that," he said. Maybe he almost crooned it, there in the thick dark.

He moved closer and, finally, he indulged himself. He pushed her hoodie back from her face. She had to tip her head way back to keep looking him in the eye and he liked that. He could see her pulse go wild in her neck and he liked that more.

Zachary reached over and slid his hand along the line of her jaw, then curled his fingers into her hair. It was silky and warm. She smelled like jasmine.

Night-blooming. His favorite.

He thought his dick might explode.

So he hauled her to him and got his mouth on hers.

And he didn't play.

He kissed her filthy. He kissed her deep. He ate at her mouth and he didn't take it easy on her. He kept kissing her until she was making hot, sweet noises in her throat and when he pulled back, she looked a lot like she'd come again.

Though he knew better. Coming close wasn't coming.

He was something of an expert on that sliver of space and sensation in between.

Her pupils were dilated. Her mouth was sloppy from his. She was gripping his t-shirt like she wanted to climb him.

"Something you should know about me, Romily, is that I don't let a woman come without my permission." He nipped at her lip, just hard enough to make her flush a darker pink. "And certainly not twice."

"What... how can I make it up to you?" she asked, and her voice was husky. A little bit wild.

Zachary knew surrender when he tasted it.

So he held out his hand and waited for her to take it. “Let’s call it a do-over,” he said. “We can see if you know how to behave.”

Romily didn’t pretend she didn’t know what he meant. She swallowed again, hard, at what might have been the same images of the two of them fucking in her head that he had in his. If her expression was anything to go by. “And if I don’t?”

But Zachary didn’t answer that. He just smiled. And kept his hand outstretched.

Romily looked past him, like she was judging the distance to her boat. Or her likelihood of getting tossed over his shoulder, which was currently pretty fucking high.

She didn’t run. What she did was lick her lips, which he thought might kill him.

Then she reached out and slipped her hand in his.

“Okay,” she said, though her voice still gave her away. “Let’s do this.”

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“Call it what it is, baby,” he told her, and that, too, was a command.

Her whole body came to attention. She had to blink a few times.

“Okay,” she breathed. “Let’s go fuck.”

“And?”

Romily made a soft noise of something that sounded like distress, but he knew it was more textured than that.

He could feel it him, too.

“And let’s see,” she said, so prettily, like she was made for him, “if I can make it up to you.”

### Chapter Four

Romily had no idea what came over her.

Or what these words were, coming out of her mouth like she’d been born to say them.

She felt as if she was lit on fire. As if her skin might crack and peel at any moment, though she suspected that even that would give her no relief. His gaze on hers, such a piercing, impossible blue, haunted her with every breath.

After she’d run off from his door she’d gone back to her boat, but couldn’t seem to

think her way out of this. She couldn't seem to settle, no matter what she did. Chamomile tea was a joke. The cold water in her tiny onboard shower only made her aware of how overly warm she was. Everywhere.

She'd given up.

Eventually, Romily had crawled out of her berth, pulled on her scuffed up sneakers and her favorite hoodie, and tucked her hair away so that maybe that might give her some anonymity. Not that anyone would be looking for her, she knew — except possibly the police, and for good reason, since it turned out she was some kind of weird voyeur — but it was better not to go outaround here in the middle of the night while obviously fragile. Much less female.

And then he'd been right there.

As if she'd conjured him up from her overheated dreams.

Zachary.

She could taste the syllables of his name in her mouth. And she could taste him, too. Because he had kissed her with such filthy, glorious thoroughness that she was fairly certain she would never be the same.

More than that, it was as if all the wrecked and ruined parts of her suddenly... clicked into place.

As if she understood herself in that moment more than she had in all these years.

As if this man was the answer she'd been searching for all along.

The truth was, she would have followed him no matter where he went, and the fact he

offered her his hand was just icing on the cake.

Because she loved the feeling of his skin against hers. She would do anything for more of it. Anything at all.

She knew where he was heading now, so she paid no mind to the details of the walk she knew so well. She was unable to keep her eyes from drooping to something like half-mast. Unable to care about anything but that large, imposing, perfect Viking at her side like all her dreams come true. Unable to keep the smile off of her face as they moved through the thick night air.

And for the first time since she'd moved here, she paid absolutely no attention to her surroundings.

Because Zachary made her feel safe.

There was a part of her brain—or maybe her wary, suspicious heart—that tried to shout out warnings and wave red flags, but she dismissed them.

Not because she was a fool, though she'd certainly been one in the past. But because she knew those were ghosts. Echoes of a time gone by. Scars from the life she'd left behind.

The thing about Zachary was that he made her feel protected, here and now. Stars and ghosts and all.

It was something about the stern, sure way he'd talked to her about prices to be paid with that hot, knowing gleam in his blue gaze. It had made her feel like she was trembling into pieces, like a hot, wet lick straight down the center of her being.



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She was still trembling like that. It seemed to have no beginning and no end, but went on and on and on.

Maybe she didn't want it to stop. Maybe she wanted to see what it would make of her.

He led her down the alley once more, but this time he didn't stop at the door to that office that led into his gym. She peered through the window anyway, even though it was dark. She could still see the way he'd pounded that cock of his into that woman, first her pussy and then her mouth.

Romily felt herself bloom all over, wondering if she was about to experience the things she'd seen. Hopingshe would.

And wondering if she would survive it. If it would be as good as it had looked. As hot and as wild.

Her pussy already thought this was the hottest thing she'd ever experienced, that was for sure.

Zachary stopped walking at the foot of the stairs, his hand still gripping hers. She looked up. He was looking back at her, the blue of his eyes that knowing gleam again.

Like he was imagining pounding into her too.

"I knew you liked to watch," he told her in that low voice of his that danced all over

her skin like a different kind of heat. “But I had no idea how much.”

“I had no idea you knew I existed,” Romily replied, barely recognizing her own voice, it was so scratchy.

“Oh, I knew,” Zachary said, his own voice rougher than before.

Because he wanted this the way she did. Because he’d been watching her too.

Romily could feel another orgasm shimmer, right there on the edge, but the other thing he’d said came back to her then. No coming without his permission. Why was that so hot?

But it was.

Even as she flushed and felt herself sweat a little as she fought it off.

When she did, his hard mouth curved behind his dark beard. “Good girl.”

Then, as she felt the pleasure of pleasing him wash through her like he’d actually let her touch that gorgeous cock of his, he led her up those stairs.

Romily felt the way her heart was punching against her ribs and wondered where she’d gotten the boldness to do... any of this. Even daring to tell him she hadn’t realized he’d ever noticed her.

She knew that some might not think that was particularly daring at all, but she had always been the sort to admire brightness in others. She’d never shined much herself.

That was what happened, growing up the way she had. Shining in any way at all, calling attention to herself like that, could only get her in trouble while she was

bounced from one family member to another—all of them wanting applause and endless gratitude for not kicking her off into the system.

Sometimes—often—she'd had to think that the system might have been better.

She didn't know why this man, who was notably and clearly unsafe in a thousand ways, made her feel as if she had never been more protected. Or more precious, somehow, simply because he'd noticed her.

Maybe that was the trauma talking, as her therapist liked to say.

But Romily kind of thought it was just... Zachary.

At the top of the stairs, he punched a code into a keypad, the imposing steel door opened, and then it was really happening. They weren't going to be in public any longer.

She was actually going to be alone with this man. With her Viking.

Zachary led her inside and the heavy door slammed shut behind them, and Romily braced herself for what was about to happen?—

But it didn't.

They stood there, just inside the door. In what would have been total darkness, but he had no curtains or blinds on his windows and they all looked out over the lights from the marina, Coast Guard Island beyond, and Alameda in the distance. If she turned her head, she knew that she would be able to see down into Brooklyn Basin, and no doubt across to San Francisco, too, if it weren't quite so foggy.

She waited for him to turn on the lights, but when he didn't, she blinked. And

realized she could see him well enough in the reflected gleam from outside.

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The gleam from the lights in the marina, she thought then. Her marina. He could stand right there at that big window and see her boat.

She wasn't imagining this.

"You've been watching me too," Romily whispered.

"Since the day you moved in."

"I can't imagine why that would hold your interest," she said nervously. "Why I would."

She wasn't putting herself down. Her therapist was always on her about that, but she'd seen his blonde. Hisstunningblonde. That certainly wasn't Romily.

But Zachary moved then. He came closer, standing above her so she had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

Way, way up.

Up close, he seemed like even more of a Viking to her. He was so tall. His shoulders were so broad. And that beard only emphasized the harsh beauty of his face. Romily knew exactly what sort of things he did to keep those muscles looking the way they did—she'd seen him do them—and she had never wanted to put her hands on another person as much she did just then.

Her palms actuallyitchedwith the need to touch him.

Though she knew better.

Somehow, she knew better.

“You know exactly what holds my interest.” That stern note was back in his voice and it wound its way down deep into her body, making her pussy clench tight around the blaze he’d put there. “It’s this, little bird. The way you flutter. The way you melt inside when I look at you. The way I want to tell you exactly what to do and something in you wants to do it, no matter what it is.”

Romily felt as if she’d been kicked in the gut. All the breath seemed to leave her body, but it was replaced by heat so white-hot and so intense there was a part of her that thought she might actually explode. Or die—but she was certain that she didn’t actually want to die.

Not when she finally felt alive for the first time in years.

Maybe ever.

“You can’t... You can’t know that. People don’t want... What?”

Something changed on his hard, beautiful face. A kind of patience dawned, maybe. An awareness that was in no way less hot. “Have you done this before?”

“I’m not a virgin if that’s what you mean,” she said, though it stuttered out of her and it made her feel silly. Stupid. “Do you know what year it is?”

“I’m not talking about sex,” Zachary said, not exactly gently. “Not the kind of sex just anyone can have when they stumble out of a bar in the middle of the night.”

Romily couldn’t imagine this man stumbling at all. Ever. Much less out of bars.

He reached out and took her chin between his thumb and a knuckle, then tipped her head up.

And there was nothing sweet about it. She felt chained there, unable to look away from him, caught as securely in that grip as if he'd tied her down.

The very idea of that, being tied down by him, made her whole body flush all over again.

And there, between her legs, her pussy went soft and hot.

"I'm talking about this," Zachary told her, like he knew. Like he knew exactly what reaction her body was having. "This thing between us. This electricity. It's different."

"I married the last person who told me that," she said, feeling dizzy and something like sick, and yet she still didn't pull away from him. "And it was different, all right. He started being an asshole on our wedding night and only got worse from there."

"Sounds like a douchebag," Zachary growled. "I'm not a douchebag, Romily. What I'm talking about is fucking. With a power dynamic."

"I don't like power games," she whispered, even though her body was telling her something else, trembling and shaking, making her wonder if she even knew what she was talking about.

"I'm going to guess that what you don't like is a power-hungry asshole who likes to make women feel like shit." Zachary moved his thumb, rubbing it over her lip in a way that was blatantly sexual, and yet not a caress. Or not only a caress. "I can't blame you. Who would?"

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She was afraid this was about to become terribly disappointing. That she was about to disappoint him, and she wasn't sure she was going to recover from that.

Not to mention the fantasies she'd been having of him that had gotten her through these last six months.

Romily sighed. "I get it, you want me to be servile. Cry and beg and do whatever you tell me, though I'll never be good enough. So you can tear me into little pieces." She shook her head. "Been there, done that."

She expected his temper, then. She expected him to explode, but he didn't.

He only watched her.

"I'm not into humiliation," he told her in that gruff voice, laced through with certainty. She had the wild thought that this was what integrity sounded like. "Not being good enough isn't on the table. You're already good enough or why would I want to fuck you this badly? The only thing you need to do is what I tell you to do. Nothing more. Nothing less."

Romily heard a ragged sound. It only distantly occurred to her that she'd made it.

"Can you do that?" Zachary asked. He let his thumb dip into her mouth and grunted when she dared to suck on the tip of it. "Because I have a feeling that if you can, you and me are going to burn this place to the ground."

That part of her brain that was warning her off was loud, but her body was louder.



And it wanted him in ways that she couldn't begin to understand.

It wanted him in ways that made her feel bold. Bright.

“What happens if I change my mind?”

“You say stop. And we stop.” He shook his head. “He did a number on you, didn't he?”

She tried to smile, but didn't get there. “He did a lot of things.”

Zachary leaned in then, and she couldn't have begun to describe that look on his face. So intent. So sure. He cupped her face in his hands, his blue eyes so intense they felt like they were inside her, too.

Like he was already deep, deep inside her.

“I like control,” he told her. “And I think that you like giving it up. But there is not one part of me that wants to take advantage of that part of you. The point is to exchange it. So you get to surrender, and I get that control, and we both get off so good and so hard that we're never quite the same afterward. And neither one of us is diminished. Sound good?”

“That sounds improbable,” Romily said, because she might as well confess to this man. She might as well tell him everything, because he already seemed to know things he shouldn't. Somehow that felt safe to her. “Impossible, actually.”

“Oh little bird, you have no idea,” he said then, “how very, very long I've wanted to get my teeth into you.”

All she could do was shake her head. “I can't tell what part is real and what part

you're just saying."

His forbidding mouth curved. "Just remember, all you have to do is what I tell you. When I tell you. Deal?"

Romily wanted to say yes more than she had ever wanted anything else, but she shook. She shook and shook. And she stared up at him, his hands still on her face and a whole world in his gaze that she wanted so badly to understand.

To feel.

"I saw the way you watched me." His voice was a low, dark thread of sound that seemed to tie her up where she stood, longing and afraid and filled with need. "I know exactly how much you want my cock in that greedy little pussy of yours. You want me so much that just the idea of it made you come. Twice." He leaned a little closer. Just a little. "Let me fuck you, baby."

And that, too, came out an order.

Romily found herself nodding, her gaze glued to his.

Zachary shook his head, those blue eyes lighting her up from the inside out. "You're going to have to say it."

She couldn't possibly. She really would die.

But he wanted her to say it. So she did. Because he suddenly seemed crucial to her staying alive and better yet—feeling like this, like every cell in her body wasampedandreadyand fully present in this.

"I want you," she whispered. "To fuck me. Please."

“Good girl,” he murmured, and it was shocking, how everything inside of her seemed to shiver into joy. Into sheer delight that she could please him.

That she did.

He tipped forward, and bit her lower lip, just enough to make her breath catch. Then he licked it, which was better and worse, at once. Then he leaned back, settling himself against the door and crossing his arms in that way she'd seen him do in the office.

And the look he turned on her then was nothing but stern.

Everything inside of her went bright and hot and red.

“Take off your clothes,” he told her.

And she felt as if her heart stuttered. Romily could feel her clit pulsing, so she pressed her thighs together, because she thought —

“Don't you dare,” he growled. “Remember, little bird. All your orgasms are mine. I'll let you know when you can have one.Ifyou can.”

Romily thought that if she actually did up and die right there, that would be fine, because this would be the hottest thing that had ever happened to her. Just the way he spoke about these things, so frankly, so openly. She felt as if he was touching her even when he wasn't. Even when she was standing and watching him, with actual space between them.

The truth was, she didn't care where they were. They could be down the mats of his gym for all that mattered to her. Outside in that alley. In the floodlights that lit up the

old Port Authority building like a show for half of Oakland.

She had never wanted anything this much. She hadn't known it was possible.

Those stern, demanding blue eyes were on her and all she wanted to do was... Whatever he told her to.

She kicked off her sneakers. She pulled her hoodie up and over her head, then dropped that on the floor too. Underneath, she was wearing her favorite pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She pulled the T-shirt off first, scanning his expression for hints of... anything, but he only stared back, impassive.

Or she would have thought he was impassive, that was, but she could see the heat in his gaze.

She undid the button of her jeans, and had to shimmy them down over her hips because of the stretchy fabric. And then when she kicked them aside she was standing there in nothing but panties and a bra. She paused, and when she did, he lifted his eyebrow. Slightly.

But she felt that like a scolding. She flushed, and hurried to undo her bra, though her fingers felt thick and silly, and she couldn't get the clasp undone. He made no move to help her, so she pulled it up, over her head, and threw it down.

Then, realizing that she was panting loud enough that the sound of it filled the room, she forced herself to pull her panties down and step out of them, too.

And then she was standing in front of him.

Naked.

As he'd commanded.

He stared at her. He kept staring. And after a while, his gaze moved, taking his time as he studied every inch of her. Every last inch.

Romily stood there, not knowing what to do with her hands. Not knowing where to look, or how to breathe.

After an eternity, as she bit on the inside of her lip and ordered herself not to fidget, he lifted one hand and twirled a finger, ordering her to turn.

So she did.

She realized that she could feel the way he looked at her, as if his gaze was a touch. Her own eyes were glassy, filled with a moisture that she understood had nothing to do with the urge to cry and everything to do with that same liquid heat that defined her, now.

Like wanting him was who she was.

"Turn back to face me," he said.

So she did. Desperate to see him again.

That beautiful, stern face of his.

He moved off the wall and came closer to her, moving her clothes out of the way with his foot. Then he walked around her, close enough that she was sure that she could feel his heat. It poured off him, filling the room. And she could smell the scent of him. It was clean, faintly woodsy, and something else that seemed like a tuning fork, deep inside.

She wanted to gulp him down whole.

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“I’ve been watching you for a long time,” he told her, thrilling her. “Those big eyes of yours like frightened gold. All of that amber and all of that wariness turns me on. That mouth of yours, that I’ve never wanted to fuck more than I do right now. You’re beautiful, Romily. Do you know that?”

He was at her side when he said that, and she shook her head, feeling... something like helpless. “I don’t think...”

“I’m telling you that you’re beautiful,” he said in the stern, matter-of-fact way. “And what are the rules?”

“You tell me what to do,” she whispered, and she had that part down. The words came out of her as if she’d been saying things like that her whole life.

“Good,” he said, and she felt like she was gleaming. “I’m telling you to start treating yourself like you’re beautiful. Because beautiful is strong. And I’m going to need you to be strong, because the demands I intend to make on this body of yours? They’re going to be a lot. Not necessarily tonight, but we’ll get there. And you’re going to have to have a certain level of physical fitness to meet those demands.”

That streak of that boldness flared in her again. “This is a very unorthodox way of advertising your gym services, Zachary.”

She shocked herself, but then he shocked her more, because he laughed.

It was the best music she’d ever heard.



“Cute. And if I was in a different mood, you’d pay for that. But not tonight.”

He came around to the front of her and smoothed a hand over her hair. “Kneel.”

The funny thing was, she didn’t have to think about it. It was as if his commands were wired directly to her body.

She just... knelt.

And couldn’t seem to drag her gaze away from that huge, impossible cock that she could see pressing there against the fly of his jeans.

“You have to earn the right to take my cock in your mouth,” he told her, in that same uncompromising manner. “And a broken little bird who spies through windows and comes twice without permission has definitely not earned it.”

His words were raw. The filthiest thing she’d ever heard, yet so... casual.

All while his hand moved its way through her hair, caressing her.

“But you can kiss it through my jeans,” he told her. “Let me see how much you want to taste me.”

She realized she was holding her breath. She dared to look up, and he was gazing down the length of his own beautiful body as he watched her. As he waited.

And suddenly she had never wanted anything more to show this man every single sensation that wracked through her. Every single sensation that he’d given her.

So she leaned forward, opened her mouth, and pressed it to the soft denim of his jeans.

And worshipped the enormous cock she could feel, heavy and hard, beneath.

## Chapter Five

She was artless.

She was a wonder.

If Zachary wasn't so big on control, and if he didn't practice that control first and foremost on himself, he was pretty sure he'd have lost it by now. Like the dumb teenager he'd never been.

As she lavished her attention to his fly as if it was a feast she'd never thought she'd get to partake in.

As if he was some kind of dessert.

And God help him, but she was such a pretty thing. Her tits were high and round, with dark nipples he couldn't wait to suck and bite to see how he could drive her wild. Exactly how, and how far.

He had already found her worryingly intriguing just by watching her skulk around the neighborhood, sometimes oblivious and sometimes seemingly spooked by her own shadow. Now all he could think about was what a tasty morsel she was. How she tasted in his mouth, tart and perfect. How she looked naked in his apartment and kneeling at his feet.

Now all he could think about were all the different ways he could indulge himself in her.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:20 am*

Zachary had spent a lot of time over the last decade or so learning how to keep himself fully contained within the boundaries he'd decided would keep him safe once he left prison. No gluttony. No bingeing of any kind. No overindulging in the kinds of things that could wreck a man, if he wasn't careful.

That didn't necessarily mean substances, though he was a controlling fuck when it came to his own body, too. Thing was, he knew from experience that emotion was twice as deadly as cocaine, could get a man a lot higher, and didn't take any prisoners when it got toxic.

Zachary wasn't about to lose his shit again.

He'd already paid that price.

These days he kept his indulgences on a strict schedule. He allowed himself to long for more at times, because he thought it was healthy to partake in the equivalent of a glass of the hard stuff without downing the whole bottle. But he never actually broke the promises he'd made to himself.

It was about discipline.

It was about control.

He excelled at both.

The Club was a perfect example. His friend Frederick was building the brick-and-mortar version of the place not far from here, the one they'd all wanted for years but

only Frederick had the vision, capabilities, and funding to actually make happen. That was why he was called Master Frederick by everyone, even those outside the scene. He exuded what and who he was from every pore and never pretended to hide it. He was the perfect person to make and lead the Club.

But to Zachary and all the other existing members, the Club was already real. And had been for years now.

After all, this was the Bay Area—though the app was used all over the globe. Kinky people of all stripes could find their own wherever they happened to be. The Club was already a community, where weekly health tests through pre-approved clinics allowed access to the otherwise private profiles of the members so that only certified clean individuals could play the dominance and submission games that all the Club members preferred.

The vetting process to join was stringent and uncompromising, requiring just enough personal information and double-checking for users to risk breaking any rules. In the years it had been operational, Zachary had heard of very few violations.

He liked it because it was easy, convenient, and meant he didn't have to play games with vanilla girls in dark bars who only wished they wanted the things he did. It was how he'd hooked up with Daniela earlier tonight.

Zachary only allowed himself to play once a week if it was an intricate scene. Twice a week if it was quicker, but never with the same partner.

No messes. He outlined his expectations in advance. He saw to his partners' needs. They always parted amicably.

No messes was his watchword. It was who he was.

He hadn't permitted himself a blank slate like Romily in a long time. A blank and yet clearly messy slate, if his reaction to her was anything to go by. She was here in front of him, kneeling before him without any clothes on, working on his cock with true dedication even though he was wearing jeans. And he was fully aware that it skated perilously close to the kind of indulgences he hadn't parceled out to himself in a long, long time.

Then again, Romily was the exception, not the rule. Because he had denied himself for the past six months. He had seen her, been aware of her, even protected her from time to time, but he'd left it alone.

He'd left her alone.

Because Zachary didn't do the hard shit any longer.

She was the one who'd changed everything by showing up at his gym door tonight. She was the one who'd looked in that window. And critically—hadn't looked away.

Had, in fact, looked again instead.

This time it hadn't been Zachary chasing the buzz of another lost soul that needed the kind of saving only he could provide. Another lost cause that he'd try to solve, giving up pieces of himself along the way. He already knew how that went.

She could have walked away from him tonight.

But she hadn't.

She hadn't.

Romily was the kind of temptation he'd been avoiding for a long time, but she'd

come for him anyway. And he couldn't decide if he was better off avoiding that temptation entirely — which was wildly unappealing, obviously— or drowning in it so that it held no power over him, like some kind of aversion therapy.

He supposed that tonight was his chance to see.

Or see if she was something else entirely. Something he didn't want to name, even in the privacy of his own head.

She tipped her head back after moving her mouth all over him and the fly of his jeans. Her gold gaze met his and he found himself stroking her face.

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Like this was about more than sex, and that was the kind of thinking that was going to get him in trouble.

So instead he concentrated on the kind of trouble that would get them both off.

He had his own toys and a bed that he'd constructed to suit his whims and favorite fantasies, but he doubted very much that Romily had the kind of experience that would make that work for a first-time tour through the kind of sex he liked.

And was certain she was going to like too, if that hungry, blissed-out look on her face was any indication.

Tonight was going to have to be a little appetizer. A taste of what was to come, to stimulate the appetite.

And besides, he'd always been a little bitearthier than some of his friends in the scene. A little more down to earth, or so he like to think.

Less drama, more fucking.

Because to Zachary's mind, props were all well and good. He had quite a few favorites himself. But he'd always thought that if you didn't know how to create the kind of power exchange that got you off without them, you probably weren't very good at it.

Guess he'd find that out tonight too.

He reached down and helped Romily up, keeping his grip on her shoulders as she breathed a little too heavy and seemed uncertain on her feet.

“I’m going to fuck you,” he told her, his voice a low, authoritative growl.

He watched the effect it had on her. The way she stood a little straighter, even though she shivered more. He watched as goosebumps wound their way down the sides of her neck, and made her nipples into even tighter points.

If he reached down, he knew she’d be wet and silky.

So he kept going. “Hard. Deep. That’s how I like it. And there’s no telling what I might do while I’m pounding into you like that. I’m going to get my hands on that ass. At least one finger in your asshole. Because someday, probably soon, I’m going to bend you over and fuck that hot little ass, too.”

Zachary studied her as he spoke, taking inventory of her responses. The way her pupils dilated. The way her lips parted, and that pulse that went wild at her throat to match her breath.

The way the things he said he’d do made her flush and shift where she stood, betraying her arousal.

One green light after another.

Because of course she was fucking perfect. He’d known it the moment he’d seen her. And every moment since, but especially this one. She was like a wet dream come true, and she was right here in his apartment.

“If we met the usual way, you would already have filled in a long list of the things you like. The things you don’t.” He kept his gaze on her, drinking her in. “I would



already have decided which boundaries I would push and all the ways I would make you beg. Tonight we're going to go old school and see where we end up."

"You..."

Her voice was ragged, and he watched as she had to moisten her lips more than once. He didn't think he needed to tell her how he felt about face-fucking and how much he like to get balls-deep down a pretty throat. She'd watched him earlier. She knew.

Besides, he was pretty confident he'd have a chance to show her his take on that particular pleasure. Soon.

She was still struggling to speak, and not because she was afraid. Over stimulated, maybe, but not afraid. He could see it all over her. "Y-you like that? The begging?"

"There are few things I like more than a beautiful woman begging for my cock," he assured her. "And imagining all the ways I can make that happen. Not all of them comfortable, but all of them hot."

"I don't know how I feel about that." Her hands moved at her sides like she wanted to push away, but she didn't. "I don't think... I don't know how to do this. I've never..."

He stroked her face again, reveling in the flushed heat of her cheek and the way she pushed it deeper against his palm. Like a pet.

The real truth—a truth he didn't much like or want to admit—was that he'd been wanting his very own pet for a long, long time.

"All you have to do is what I tell you to do," he said, again in that same low voice that he could see made her quiver. "You have no responsibilities here, Romily. All

that's required is that you take my cock how I give it to you, come when I tell you to, and say stop if that's what you want."

She swayed slightly in his hold. But she still didn't step back or push away. She seemed as mesmerized by his gaze, or his words, or maybe all of this between them as he felt himself.

The danger she presented to him only grew, but there was no possibility that he was going to follow his rules and walk away from this. From her.

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Romily seemed more than worth a few broken rules.

The taste of her alone was going to keep him going for a long, long time.

But they weren't finished.

“Do you understand?” he asked her, in a steady voice, as if he wasn't torturing himself already with all the things he wanted to do to her lovely little body.

She swallowed, her eyes big. “I keep thinking that I should object to this, but I'm already naked and I already...” Her eyes skated down to the front of his jeans, where he was even harder now. And where the fabric was damp from the way she had mouthed him through the denim. “And I was staring at you through the window. So I guess —”

“Romily.”

Her name was a command and her eyes immediately went wide. And stopped talking. She was that responsive.

She was perfect—but only if she wanted to be here.

“You want to go? Go.” He said it gently enough, but he meant it. “The only thing that I want holding you here is how badly you want to know what it's like to feel me so deep inside you that you can't breathe. So badly that you'll obey my rules, not because I'm a power-hungry douche but because they'll make what we do that much better. If you don't want that, you don't have to stay. I'll make sure you get home

safe, no harm and no foul.”

Zachery saw the hint of ghosts in her eyes then, and he hated that. But he knew his way around ghosts. Better yet, he knew exactly how to exorcise them. So he waited, as her body quivered and he watched her battle her own instincts.

Her own fears.

Like the brave little thing he already knew she was.

“I want to stay,” she said, quietly. After a long while. And when he lifted a brow, her breath feathered out of her lips. She made a sound that was almost like a gasp, but she soldiered on. “I mean, I want you to fuck me. I want to come when and if you tell me. I want to obey.” Her eyes went shy, but she didn’t hide them. “I want all those things, Zachary.”

His name in her mouth, giving him that consent, was better than whole orgasms with other women. But he wasn’t going to think about that just then. Not if he wanted this to last, and he did.

He wanted to make this epic for her.

Maybe not only for her.

“Good girl,” he rumbled at her instead, keeping his voice dark, so he could watch the way she reacted to him.

Keeping her on edge.

He pushed away from the door at his back and he shifted her around with him, guiding her over to stand in the center of that big, wide window.

She was already trembling, and he knew it was need. He could smell it.

“I want you to look down at your life,” he told her as he held her there before the window. “When I’m inside of you, fucking you silly, I want you to think about the fact that nothing is ever going to be the same.”

He watched her take that in, watched her amber eyes widen and her throat move.

“Do you want it to be the same?” he asked.

She was already shaking her head. “No.”

Satisfied, he moved across the darkness of his living room and fished out a condom from the stash he kept in the side table. Because a wise man was always prepared to entertain, and sometimes he liked to use condoms with women he knew were clean like him, and protected besides, just to keep them guessing and unsure.

Games were games.

Zachary came back and stood in front of her so he was blocking the view, but he didn’t touch her. Not yet. He held her gaze as he reached down and shoved his jeans over his hips.

Then he took his cock in his fist, and rolled the condom down for a snug fit that he knew was going to help him get them where he wanted them to go. Because he had a feeling Romily was going to feel so good clenched tight around him that he’d want to empty himself inside her immediately this first time.

He really had wanted her for much too long.

“Once I fuck you,” he gritted out, “that’s the end of it. You got that, right?”

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“The end of what?” she whispered.

He reached over and tapped one finger to her temple. Once. Again. “Him. In here.” He held her gaze, hard. “We’re going to fuck, he’s going to be gone, and anything that happens after that is yours. Only yours. You understand?”

She sucked in a breath that sounded a little too close to a sob, but he was okay with that. Tears didn’t scare him. On the contrary.

“I understand,” she said, her voice little more than a breath.

He was good with that, too.

Zachary moved closer, bent down, then hauled her up and off her feet. He held her there, high against his chest, until she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Only then did ease his grip and slide his hands down to her hips. Then over the curve of her sweet ass so he could delve into that soft, hot slit between as she wrapped herself around him.

He held her like that, pleased to feel how wet her pussy was. How silky sweet she’d already gotten for him, because she’d need it. She was built narrow and he was a big man.

And he had every intention of making sure that she took all of him.

“You’re not going to say a single word,” he told her then, in a gravelly tone. “Unless it’s the wordstop. You can make noise. You can cry, scream, sob. You can dig your

fingers into me. Bite me if you want. But no words, Romily.”

His voice was stern and he could feel the rush of wet heat that caused.

So he continued. “The only thing you have to think about this is cock, and how it’s going to split you in half.”

She shuddered at that, already halfway there, and he grinned as he lowered her down and finally nudged his way into the slick heat of her pussy.

He did that a little while, another indulgence, drinking in the way she shuddered and squirmed, as if she couldn’t decide if she was trying to get closer or farther away from him. And then, when she was moving against him in a way he found cute tonight— though it might have invited a punishment at another time— he found that slick entrance, spread her thighs even wider, and began working his way in.

She was even tighter than he’d imagined. So astonishingly tight. Tight and hot and slick and he took his time, bringing her down a little further, inch by inch. Then lifting her again, like he could do it all night. Like he could keep this slow push and retreat forever.

Like it wasn’t testing him at all, feeling her clench so hard around him, like a plush little fist.

He heard her breathing go ragged. He could see the way her pulse thundered in her neck.

And he could feel that answering roar in him.

Slowly, slowly, Zachary fucked his way in deep. And he kept going until she was slicked with a fine sheen of perspiration, her head tipped forward with her mouth on

his shoulder, making low and guttural groans that seemed to wire directly into him, lighting him up.

She was even more electric than he'd imagined.

Maybe later he would have to take a look at that. Maybe later he would have to do a lot of things, but he couldn't let himself think about that now. Not now, with Romily such a sweet, soft weight in his arms and her lush pussy clenched so tight and well around him.

When he was not a small man.

He seated himself inside her, all the way to the root, and he waited. For her breath to settle a little. For her to recover a little bit while he filled her so completely.

For her to adjust to him, the way he could tell she needed to.

And she did, brave little thing that she was, panting it out against his shoulder. He felt her make a hundred tiny shifts to accommodate him and as she did, he could feel her relax around his cock, making everything that much hotter.

Then, almost as if she couldn't help herself, she blew out a breath and lifted up her head to look him in the eye.

Bolder than she thought, his little bird.

That was when he began to move.

And he wasn't gentle. He wasn't sweet. He gripped her ass hard and then he moved her up and down on his cock, like a sex toy.



Zachary knew exactly how strong he was, and exactly how to move her so that he could hit her everywhere it felt good and deep and right there on the verge of too much—as long as it felt.

Again and again and again.

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Because this part was about the fucking.

This was about the journey. The thrust and the retreat, the slick way he used her to fuck him, like they were both part of the same machine.

Some people were always in a rush to the finish, but that wasn't sex as far as Zachary was concerned. He liked to fuck. He liked to make it last.

He liked to hang out on that edge and see how long it took to break.

She moaned something, and he grinned, feeling wild with all this intensity, and the way she felt draped around him, like he'd carved her into being straight out of his best fantasies.

"No coming until I tell you," he reminded her. "And no words, little bird. All you have to do is hold on and let me make you fly."

She tilted her head back and he could see her, then. All of her. The mad passion in her eyes, bright like gold. The way she couldn't quite get her mouth to close over the way she was breathing out those moans of hers.

The way she gripped him, her thighs around his torso and her arms around his neck, those round breasts of hers scraping their way across him with every deep thrust.

He could also see how much she wanted to speak.

Maybe almost as much as she wanted to come, quivering around him the way she

was.

“You better hold on tight,” he gritted out at her. “I’ve needed to fuck you like this for a long, long time, Romily. This is going to take a while.”

## Chapter Six

The world seemed to narrow down and expand all at once. There seemed like a thousand things she ought to have been doing, noticing, cataloguing—but she couldn’t manage it. It was like she had no access to her brain the way she normally did no matter what was happening.

Tonight, all Romily could concentrate on was Zachary.

On the impossible strength he displayed so offhandedly. The way he held her up and moved her against him and didn’t seem even remotely out of breath.

On the way his dangerous Viking face looked, harsh lines somehow beautiful, that beard a revelation now that she’d felt it against her skin and those blue eyes that she was certain saw every last part of her.

On the fact that she was naked and he was almost entirely clothed still, his jeans shoved down to free him and nothing else like the fantasy she’d watched play out earlier—only now it was happening to her.

On the enormous cock that hammered into her again and again and again. Or maybe she was technically the hammer in this situation, given he was using her as the tool to fuck them both.

And it turned out that this beautiful, terrifying, perfect man was remarkably good with tools.

Zachary maintained the same rhythm. The same precise rhythm, moving her body so that she was creating the friction even though she was literally putty in his hands and frictionless in every other way.

It was glorious. It was outside anything Romily had ever experienced before. It was as if she'd never touched or been touched before—that was how utterly new this felt.

And it wasn't just the way he was doing this, the actual mechanics of this. It was everything surrounding it. Her obedience. His approval.

Her surrender, his delicious control.

She could barely conceive of what had already happened, much less what was happening to her now. Happening and happening and happening.

Normally it took a lot of work and time and effort for her to come. This was true when she was alone as well as when she'd been with other men in the past. She'd been certain, for years now, that it was an anatomical situation. And she hadn't much cared, because she could usually get there eventually. Not generally with anyone.

But Zachary seemed positive not only that she would come, but that she might come more than once.

And then he'd ordered her not to.

It had seemed silly. She might have laughed if the situation had been less intense. If she'd been braver she might have told him not to worry, that she'd be just fine holding herself back from something that was unlikely to ever occur, thanks.

But now it was like every single breath she took was at threat connected directly to her clit.

The more she told herself not to come, the more something seem to wind tighter and tighter deep inside of her. Something big and precarious and as serious as that blue gleam in his gaze.

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It wound around and around and then arrowed straight down into her pussy, building sensation with every single one of his deep, assured, precise thrusts.

Romily tried to concentrate on other things. The taste of his shoulder in her mouth when she dipped her head forward, salt and heat. The way his big, callused hands gripped her with such ease and confidence. As if he already knew every possible secret her body could hold.

That made sense to her because the things he'd said he would do to her, she wanted. She wanted them desperately. Things that had never been even remotely interesting to her before, things that scared her a little—it all made sense because it was Zachary.

Because everything seemed to come down to this.

To him.

Deep inside her like he belonged there.

She felt herself begin to sweat.

“Look at you,” Zachary rumbled, his voice sounding perfectly calm. As if they were sitting somewhere elegant, sipping tea and making sophisticated conversation. “Trying so hard to be good.”

That made her want to be even better. She felt the urge—the deep desire—to please him shimmer in her like a different kind of coming.

At the same time she felt a deep, warning shiver go through her and this one wasn't ashimmer. This one made her clench and then shake as she fought off the sudden huge and looming climax that seemed to press in on her.

No coaxing. No hoping. No straining.

It was like trying to fight off a lightning bolt that was already poised to strike.

"That looks difficult," Zachary observed, clearly finding what was happening to her entertaining. "It would be terrible if someone pushed you over the edge when you were instructed not to come, wouldn't it, little bird?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He shifted her, holding her against him with one powerful arm while the other moved so that he could get his hands between them.

And then, his blue eyes direct on hers, he pinched her clit.

It was a shock. It made her jolt—and then he was slamming her back down on that cock, sinking himself deep.

Romily ignited and exploded into too much sensation to do anything but feel.

She heard sounds that she couldn't believe were coming from her own mouth, though she knew they were. That she was the one making them. He kept pumping her onto him like he could piston her body against his for eternity and she kept coming and coming, not sure if she was sobbing or singing or simply lost in the cataclysm that took her over.

Over and over again.

When she was done—or maybe simply wrung out—she came back to what was left

of her senses and found herself limp against him. Zachary was still holding her in his arms and she let her eyes close again, because that felt good. Right.Safe.

But when she felt as if they were suddenly moving, she forced herself to open her eyes again. She was amazed to find that her head wasn't spinning—Zachary was simply moving across the apartment. Still holding her against him and his cock still deep inside her, and as ferociously hard as ever.

Still fully dressed except for a swathe of hip and cock.

It was all so hot it made her shake. Romily clenched down on him experimentally, as he moved, and that set off a whole set of aftershocks.

She realized her face was damp and she understood immediately that she'd been sobbing for real. That had been part of that prolonged explosion, even though it seemed impossible. Romily couldn't remember the last time she'd cried. Tears were a provocation in her marriage, so she'd learned to keep them to herself.

Zachary pulled her off him and she watched his blue eyes first sharpen, then darken, as she let out an involuntary moan of loss when she felt herself completely empty again. It made her shudder.

"You broke the rules, little bird," he told her, with a great solemnity. But there was also that fire in his gaze. "Now I have no choice but to punish you."

She felt her eyes widen at that.

He nodded, sorrowfully. She hadn't misheard. He'd saidpunish.Though there was that fire there in all that blue, brighter now, and she shuddered again. And felt that shudder wind its way through her as if it was possible they could start this all up again.



But that couldn't be. That was impossible. Physically impossible, she was sure.

It was absolutely impossible and yet she felt that electricity hum in her all over again, and not as if it was new. Instead it was as if they'd done this a thousand times before, because it felt like a lightning strike but it was as easy as flipping a switch. Her whole body shivered straight back into near-painful awareness, as if she hadn't just come so hard she barely knew who she was.

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Because somehow she knew that the kind of punishment Zachary had in mind wasn't anything like the extended punishment her marriage had turned into.

She could see it all over him. He didn't want to hurt her—though as she thought that she knew that wasn't right, not really. She suspected he might hurt her, but that it would be like that pinch to her clit that had set her alight.

A dash of pain to make the pleasure that much brighter.

Romily felt as if her body had been waiting all these long years of her life to understand that this, at last, was what it needed.

This was what she'd needed all along.

“Bend over the bed,” Zachary told her with a certain pitilessness that made her softer and slicker between her legs. “I'm going to spank you, Romily. Your job is to count out the number of strikes I give you. If you miss a number, we'll start over. If you try to block me from landing a strike, or roll away, we'll start over. If I feel like starting over, we'll start over. You understand?”

She almost answered him with words, but then remembered. He hadn't told her the previous rules were lifted and she suspected he would be direct about such things.

So she only nodded instead. His blue eyes gleamed. “Good girl.”

It amazed her how much she liked it when he said that.

He nodded toward the bed. She been too busy keeping her attention on him to look around the room, but as he gestured behind her she looked and saw that his bed was big an imposing. A lot like him. It had four steel posters and they were connected on the top tube, like a steel canopy in the shape of an X.

When she moved closer, she could see that there were steel contraptions in various places along the headboard. On the posts.

She didn't have to know what they were for to know that the sight of them made her legs feel weak.

"I want you to bend yourself over the bed," Zachary told her, and she was aware that he'd told her that once before. She doubted he liked to repeat himself—but maybe this was himtaking it easy on the new girl. That made her shiver too. And he was still telling her what he wanted her to do. "Ass in the air, feet on the ground. I want your hands in the small of your back. They can touch if you like. What they cannot do is move from the small of your back. Under no circumstances should you attempt to cover your ass. Do you understand?"

Again, she nodded. His brow rose and she hurried the rest of the way over to the bed and realized that it was higher than she'd anticipated. When she bent herself over it, she had to stand high on her tip toes to keep her ass on the edge as directed.

"Beautiful," he said.

And she couldn't see him now. So even though Romily knew that he was most likely behind her, it seemed to her that his voice came from everywhere. She found her own fingers behind her back and held them there. She let her cheek rest against the coverlet on his bed and closed her eyes. That only made his voice more of a lifeline. A light in the dark.

“Normally,” he said, almost conversationally, “I would use a paddle. A crop. Maybe even a whip. All do the same thing, more or less, but with intriguingly different sensations. But tonight, what you and I are doing is old school, Romily.”

He was closer now. She knew that for certain when his hand was on her, his huge, callused palms smoothing over her ass cheeks. One, then the other, as if he was learning their shapes. “You may speak. You may say, thank you, sir.”

She shuddered everywhere and it seemed to be coming from inside of her and emanating outward. “Thank you, sir,” she whispered.

And the funniest part was that she meant it.

He smoothed his hands this way and that, stirring up heat as he went. Then he dipped his way below to get his fingers all over the slippery folds of her pussy.

She didn’t know how this felt even more intimate and even dirtier than what they’d already done tonight. But it did. Maybe because he was simply... taking what he liked.

Yet somehow, his taking made her feel powerful. Precious.

He sank one thick finger deep inside her, thrust a few times—until she moaned—and then use two fingers instead. Then he reintroduced her to that intense, unendingly patient rhythm he had used on her before.

“This is how I want you to count,” he told her, when she started to arch into his hand. “You will say, one, thank you sir. Two, thank you sir. And so on. Do you understand?”

When she nodded, she heard him laugh—a new fire to make her burn. All the while his fingers kept up that insistent pump inside of her. Spearing in deep and then

moving out, the rest of his hand almost but not quite pressing against her greedy little clit.

God, when had she gotten greedy?

“I want to hear you say it,” he told her.

“Yes sir,” she whispered obediently. Immediately. “I understand.”

The first blow came instantly.

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It was a sharp smack and then a burst of heat, and it was shocking.

Ithurt.

“Th... Thank you, sir, for number one,” Romily managed to get out, haltingly, because her body was in some kind of riot. That sharp pain, so at odds with his fingers inside of her, and his pace never wavered. The more his fingers thrust into her, the sharpness of the spank he’d delivered seemed to bloom into each thrust, and it was all the same pleasure and pain as one.

She was breathing too hard. She could hardly stand still.

She had no idea what todowith all the sensation inside of her.

“That’s not quite right,” Zachary said, sounding almost pleasant. “We’ll start that over.”

Smack.The next blow landed and now both of her ass cheeks were on fire. Now shefeltherself breathing so loud that she could hear it. Gasping in breath, everything in her shuddering and completely on fire, and somehow they were the same thing. Somehow this was all terrible and wonderful at once.

“One, thank you sir,” she whispered, not sure if the words were coming out in the right order, even though she knew it was critical that they did.

“How lovely,” Zachary murmured.

And then he kept going. Sometimes he alternated sides. Sometimes he didn't. He also didn't go easy on her. His palm was exactly as hard, every time, as the first, and it hurt exactly the same—except more, because each spank made the next spank that much worse. It was red and itchy and awful and yet his fingers seemed to coax every bit of that into a different kind of throb that made her clit feel like it was its own fire.

Romily didn't know at what point she simply started sobbing again. It was all too much. There was the friction of her own breasts against the bed. She was too hot, sweating and crying. She didn't dare move her hands but her hips seemed to have a mind of their own and she had to fight to keep them from rolling away from where she imagined his next blow would come. Her legs were shaking from the effort standing up on her toes.

And Zachary's fingers were a torment inside of her.

There was something about the way he was doing this, she had the presence of mind to think at one point. He was keeping her just aroused enough that the pain made the arousal greater, but not too great that she tipped over into a forbidden orgasm—because he wanted her to feel all of this. No hiding in pleasure until the pain was done.

She was a sobbing mess in very short order and the strangest part of that was, she didn't care at all.

Zachary kept going all the way up to twenty and she kept counting it off, like the good girl she desperately wanted to be for him.

“Twenty is a nice round number,” he said, and it was as if his voice was the only thing that could possibly have penetrated the way she was sobbing openly into his bed. That and the way his hands—so hard, so cruel—smoothed over all of the red-hot, inflamed skin of her butt cheeks. “And I would have said that an ass as perfect as

yours could never be improved upon, but it's such a pretty cherry red color right now. I think you proved me wrong, little bird."

His fingers abruptly abandoned her pussy and she felt that awful emptiness again, the loss of him. It made her cry even harder.

But he was moving between her legs. She could feel the rough hair of his thighs as he reached down, adjusting her position slightly, and it occurred to her that this bed was exactly at cock height for Zachary.

A notion that made everything inside of her turn to liquid heat, even though there was still too much sensation in her ass.

One of his hands wrapped tight around her clenched fingers and anchored her arms there at the base of her spine.

"You took that spanking so beautifully that you can come when you like," he told her gruffly. "I'm proud of you."

And Romily thought that it was unlikely she would ever come again, given all the conflicting messages her body was sending itself —

But he slammed himself inside of her, burying his cock to the root and sparing no mercy whatsoever for her tender ass cheeks.

It was like a scream. It was that white-hot. It ripped through her.

Romily splintered into a trillion little pieces. Instantly. And as he began to thrust in that maddeningly intense, deep, and rhythmic way, she came again and again and again.



Almost as if he didn't quite mean to do it, his strokes got deeper, wilder.

Until finally, Zachary was simply slamming into her, over and over again, and she could feel everything. The way her face was pressed against the bed. The way her breasts were so oversensitized, her nipples their own spark every time he slammed into her. The way her arms ached, held behind her back like that and yet somehow, she'd never felt so secure.

And the way this man fucked himself into her was a revelation. Every single thrust took her over, turned her inside out, and made sure that she remembered every single one of the twenty-one spans he'd delivered to her already tonight.

She felt a different kind of volcanic, seismic catastrophe rise from a place inside of her she'd never known was there. It grew and grew until she was almost trying to run away from it, though she was pinned down and held firmly in place. She couldn't do anything to escape it.

Really, she couldn't do anything at all.

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The angle of the bed kept slamming into her clit when he buried himself inside her. And he kept thrusting so deep inside of her that she was faintly concerned that she was going to split in half.

And still that great wave of what must surely be disaster came for her.

This time, when it hit, she screamed so loud she thought she heard glass splintering—though that was possibly just inside of her. Better still, she heard him growl out his release, and that, too, seemed to go on and on.

She didn't know where she was. Up or down. Out in space somewhere or here in this apartment, on this bed.

At some point Romily felt him move and before she could really register that, he was swinging her up into his arms and then carrying her as if she was little more than a feather. She told herself that she should probably wake all the way up and pay attention, but she couldn't seem to do it. It was as if she no longer had control of her body.

She didn't really pay attention again until she found herself sitting in a bath.

More improbably, Zachary was in that bath with her and he was washing her body with an intense expression on his face.

Romily couldn't begin to translate what that meant, so she simply rested there against his wide chest and let him tend to her, even though that felt as strange as all the other things that he had done to her already tonight.

This bathroom was big enough to be a second bedroom, she thought, and enormous to a person who lived on a small boat. The tub itself sat on a raised dais and the rest of the bathroom was luxuriously spacious, with an enormous shower that was glassed in on one end, and looked like it had at least one bench inside.

She would have thought that was an innocuous bench earlier. But not now.

“We’re going to have to talk about testing and birth control, you and me,” Zachary said, a rumble in her ear that she could feel down the length of her back, too. It felt like heat and wonder and she felt herself relax against him even more.

“I tested myself for everything when I left my marriage, because he was an asshole and I don’t trust him,” she replied. Thinking about her marriage felt ridiculous here, in a place Joseph could never touch. It almost felt like a story she was telling. Not her life. “I haven’t touched anyone since. But I’m happy to get tested again.” She tilted her head back so she could look up at him. “I have an IUD.”

“Perfect,” he said, and she saw that gleam in his eyes that made her feel giddy. “I get tested weekly. I’ll show you where.”

Romily had no idea what time it was. She barely understood where she was. She felt suspended in space. In the warm water this tub. In his arms.

“Perfect,” she echoed in reply, and watched him smile at her.

It sent her giddiness into overdrive.

Then his gaze went stern again, and she felt her whole body shiver into instant awareness, though she was sure that it was really and truly physically impossible this time. Not after everything that already happened.

Sure enough, he pulled her out of the bath and dried her off—frowning as she attempted to do anything by herself—and then marched her out into the bedroom again, but not to the bed. Zachary sat in an armchair that faced another window overlooking the marina.

Romily found herself breathless.

Because he was naked. Finally. She realized this was the first time she'd seen all of him—and he lived up to every last fantasy she'd had about him over these past months. She'd seen him shirtless before—all of those muscles with tattoos spread over him, seductive and warning at once.

It was different, somehow, when she could see all of him. Those powerful thighs, also tattooed. His strong, defined legs. And that enormous cock of his, rising hard and mouthwatering before her.

God help her, but he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen in her life.

And now she knew how he smelled. How he tasted. What he sounded like when he came.

“Eyes up here,” he said, his voice an amused rumble.

Romily jumped, feeling absurdly guilty, but that gleam in his eyes was soothing. She took a breath. Then waited.

Slowly—almost lazily though there was nothing the least bit lazy about this man—he lifted one hand and drew a circle in the air. An order for her to turn around, and the funniest part was that she didn't have to think about it. Her body simply obeyed.

And the strangest part was how it made her feel almost buoyant.

Then he had her stand there before him with her hands on top of her head as he applied a salve that smelled like sweet herbs and something more complicated to her still too sensitive butt.

He took his time rubbing the salve into her hot skin, until she was breathing a little faster and working hard to keep from shifting her hips around in reaction to a different sort of heat he was building in her.

Then Zachary pulled her to him and stood her there between his legs, assessing her with that cool blue gaze of his. Gone stern again, she noticed, as everything in her melted.

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“I want you to kneel down, take my cock in your mouth, and get it nice and wet,” he told her in that formidable voice that danced all over her and made her skin prickle. And made her pussy a molten soft heat immediately, as if she hadn’t already had more sex in a night than in months. “You may say, thank you sir, for this privilege.”

“Thank you sir, for this privilege,” she said at once.

And Romily felt as if she had never been alive until this moment. Not even in all the other moments that had already happened tonight. They were all wiped away. She felt as if she had literally been created and put upon this earth for the opportunity to pull in a raggedy breath and do exactly as he directed her.

For the privilege of sinking down on her knees and settling between those thick, massively strong thighs of his. She noticed the tattoo high on one thigh, and the one that wrapped around the other. She noticed that this part of his was roughened with the same black hair he had on his chest and his head, and between his legs.

Every part of him was more beautiful than the last.

She had never wanted anything more than to lean forward and take that enormous cock in her mouth as best she could.

He let her fumble around and then he took her face in one hand and made a soft sort of sound.

“We’re going to have to work on this,” he told her, sounding serious in a way that moved through her like a heavy baseline. She had to fight not to shudder, because she

suspected that if she did, she would come that easily. Without permission. “There are few things I like as much as fucking a woman’s face. I’ll need you to work on that gag reflex. I want to come down your throat while I’m buried in it as deep as I can go.”

She could feel tears coming out of her eyes again, because she wanted that herself. She wanted it badly. Not only that, Romily had seen how much he liked it herself. She’d watched through the window. She’d hungered—and now she was here.

More than willing to learn whatever he had to teach her.

“But not tonight,” he said quietly. “The sun is about to come up. I need to open the gym and get a workout in. But first, I’m going to watch the sunrise.”

He set her back on her heels and let her sit there as he pulled out a condom from the drawer of the table next to his chair. Then he held her gaze as he tore open the packet and slowly rolled it on.

Romily would have sworn that putting on a condom couldn’t possibly be hot.

And yet everything this man did was beyond merely hot. It was hard to imagine why there wasn’t a line down the alley and halfway to Jack London square for him, day and night.

When he was done he pulled her up off her knees and settled her astride him on his lap. He had her kneel up and once again, he gathered her wrists behind her.

“I want you to fuck yourself until you come,” he said, very steadily. Very distinctly. “I want you to sink down on this cock and take all of it. Then show me how wet you are, and how much you want me. I want you loud and sloppy and determined, Romily. The only purpose of your life in this moment is to make us both come. Can you do

that?”

Her breath was already more like a pant. She was vibrating deep inside. “Yes sir,” she assured him.

So he sat back and watched her as she did what he’d told her. She lowered herself down, actually slamming herself onto him, so desperate was she to take all of him. To show him that she could. That she would. That she wanted nothing more than him filling her up, too big and too hard for that first gasping moment?—

Until the sheer glory of this washed right in behind.

And then, her wrists securely held behind her in one of his gorgeously strong hands, she began to rise and fall. She was not so much setting up a rhythm as essentially making herself feel good. Hopefully making him feel good, too. Romily didn’t have his precision, but she had that determination he’d mentioned—and anyway, what she was doing felt too good. Everything was too good.

He watched her intently, his eyes all over her face, and whatever he saw in them must have pleased him because he dropped his gaze lower. His free hand rose to test the shape of one breast. Then he shifted to play with the other one. She got the distinct impression that he approved the way they jiggled as she rocked herself against him. As the heat radiated out from her pussy, picking up steam in all the places her ass ached and then rolling out to make her nipples almost hurt, they were so hard.

The more she fucked herself on that enormous cock of his, somehow even bigger than before by her estimation, the more she slumped into him. He seemed to like that, too. His hand moved again, this time to grip her ass, even though that made her yelp—because it still hurt.

But he didn’t stop. And the more she tried to do something about it, the harder she



fucked herself against his cock. The wilder she moved against him, even though in this position, her clit was a danger as it rubbed against him and she wasn't sure how long she could keep this up without coming.

Then, she could feel his fingers again. They moved from the reddened part of her ass to trace the place where his cock was disappearing inside of her. She thought he was going to pinch her again and she shuddered in anticipation of that shock—but he didn't.

He moved his fingers in all of her wet heat and then he moved to her butt again. A moment later, Romily felt one finger press confidently against the bud of her asshole.

She was so startled that she stopped moving. But all it took was one tilt of his eyebrow, and she gulped, then started moving again. Maybe a little more carefully this time, as she tried to work out how she felt about all this new sensation.

Once again, it was like time lost all meaning. There was his cock deep in her pussy. There was the ache in her thighs from all this lowering and raising. Her shoulders were pulled back and her wrists were held tight in his grip. And now there was the finger he worked into her ass, with an intent that she could not mistake.

She could see it on his face. She could feel it in the way he handled her.

There was a point where she stopped cataloguing all of these things and simply surrendered instead. To all of it. Because this wasn't about the separate pieces, this was about the whole. Romily understood that on a level that shouldn't have made sense, but did. Because he was going to put that finger in her ass, she couldn't do anything about it, and something about that made it all hot and spicy, dark and delicious.

And better still when she simply accepted it, like it was already done.

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“Good girl,” Zachary murmured, and she understood that he knew what was happening inside of her. “You can come when you like, Romily.”

He could read all of this. He could read her. She was an open book to him, and that, too, felt like an impossibility. And made her feel safer than she ever had before in her life.

And the more she moved, penetrated so deeply in two places, the more she felt another tectonic shift happening inside of her. This time, the moment she thought about it—it was happening.

She was coming and coming, so hard it was shocking to her that something didn’t break?—

And then he was coming too. Romily found herself desperately wishing that they had already fast forwarded to whatever place they were going, so there would be nothing between them, not even that little bit of latex.

Thinking of him flooding her made her orgasm contract all over again.

This time, when they were finished and she was limp in his arms, he carried her to the bed and deposited her there.

She was vaguely aware of him moving around, then going into the bathroom. She heard the water turn on and then he was back beside her, using a warm cloth on her pussy and her ass, and a different one on her face. All the while, he murmured things she didn’t quite catch in that low voice of his.

It felt a lot like a lullaby.

“Time for you to get some sleep, little bird,” he said, reading her mind again.

But she frowned at him, though her body still felt as it was off on a different planet somewhere. Because she needed to tell him the truth, even now. Even in whatever state this was he’d left her in.

“I don’t really sleep that well,” she said softly.

His blue gaze was electric. “You will fall asleep and you will stay asleep,” he told her.

Romily felt her whole body shift at that, as if he’d adjusted her with that look alone. As if he could control her sleep as well as everything else.

Zachary lay down beside her and pulled her to him, settling her against his body as if she belonged there. As if she’d always meant to be tucked next to him like that. She pressed her face into his chest, breathing him in deep.

He reached off to the side and came back to the set of handcuffs, made of a soft leather and connected by a smooth chain. “You’re mine,” he told her. “And you’re safe.”

And then his too-blue eyes bored into her, as if he was daring her to dispute this vow he was making.

There wasn’t a single spare part of her that wanted to do that.

Solemnly, as if this was a sacred moment, Romily nodded. Then held her wrists out as he clipped her into the cuffs, made sure they were tight, and pulled her back

against his chest.

He held her, then began to breathe. Slow and deep.

She followed suit and was asleep within seconds.

When she woke up, sunlight was pouring in all of his windows, she was alone in his bed and still in those cuffs, and Romily couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so well. Or been so happy.

Especially when she looked up and saw him watching her from the doorway.

She couldn't help the way she beamed at him. "I feel like a phoenix," she said.

And Romily watched as this Viking of a man—her urban Viking—smiled. As if she was the only woman who had ever existed or ever would.

He made her believe that, too.

"Little bird," he said, "I think it's time to fly."

## Chapter Seven

The next few months were the best of Romily's life.

Zachary was very serious about testing. He insisted that her IUD was checked out by his doctor, which Romily was fine with as she'd had to have it inserted at a questionable clinic in the first place. She'd done it right after she'd left Joseph, because she never intended to leave her fertility in anyone else's hands again.

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Besides, she certainly didn't have any extra money to be paying for doctors herself.

“What you and I are going to do,” he told her the second night, because that was how quickly his doctor got results—Romily thought said doctor might be a client of the gym, “is fuck only each other for a while. Unless you have some objection to that.”

They were sitting in a dive bar not far from the marina. And they'd walked there, even though it was dusk, because Zachary like to walk around the neighborhood. He wasn't afraid of anything, as far as Romily could tell. He hardly seemed to notice the dangers that lurked in the shadows. But then again, the shadows were probably afraid of him.

It wasn't that he was oblivious to the truths of their neighborhood or the potential for unfortunate situations. There was nothing reckless about him. Rather, he was confident that whatever arose, he could handle it.

If there was something sexier, Romily couldn't really imagine it. His confidence made her feel confident. Like she was finally the version of herself she'd never really believed she could be. The version of herself she'd almost been able to glimpse in those long ago days in San Francisco, when she'd thought she had a bright and happy future ahead of her.

Instead she'd met Joseph.

But when she was with Zachary, Joseph was insignificant.

That was pretty damned sexy too.

They sat together on the banquette side of a small table in the dive bar, his thigh pressed to hers. Rock music played sullenly. The bartender looked surly and looked ready to vault over the bar at the slightest provocation. Not the sort of place Romily would frequent, but the whole world was different when she was with Zachary.

When she'd tried to order a side salad for her dinner, he'd given her that stern look and had told the waitress that Romily would have a burger with everything, the same as him.

What if I'm a vegetarian? she'd asked once the waitress had retreated—though not without eyeing Zachary's impressive arms. Romily couldn't blame her. They were literally perfect.

Are you? he'd asked.

I'm not. But I could be. You didn't ask.

I think you'll eat the burger, he'd replied. He'd leaned into her, that powerful body of his pressing against her side and reminding her of all the things they'd done the night before. In detail. Not that she imagined she would ever forget. If only because it will make me happy.

And he was right. She did.

"No," she told him now, and found herself reaching for fries when she was normally never that hungry. "I have no objections."

"My goals for this period of exclusivity are not only to teach you how to fuck me perfectly," he told her with that same serious look on his face, as if he was discussing business, not sex. She didn't understand how he could get to her the way he did. So easily. As if he'd been put on this earth to slip under her skin like this. If there was a

way to stop the way the things he said made her wet and needy, she didn't want to know it. "I've seen you these past six months. Afraid of your own shadow."

"Not my own shadow, actually," she replied.

He studied her for a moment, taking that in. Probably taking in more than she thought he was. Probably seeing everything there is to see, she thought.

But that just made her want to melt into him.

"I want you strong, Romily." He said that as if that should have been obvious to her, but not in a way that embarrassed her. He didn't say it as if she was dumb for not knowing where he was going with this. "I'm going to train you."

"Like... in your gym?" She frowned. "Your scary gym?"

He laughed at that, actually throwing his head back, and it made something inside of her that she wouldn't have said was unsettled, exactly, seem to soothe itself. He could be stern, so very stern, but he wasn't afraid to laugh. That mattered.

She knew how much that mattered.

"How is my gym scary?" He was still laughing, his face lit up still, and it made her heart skip a beat.

Romily focused on the conversation at hand, not her heart. "All the heaving around of heavy things and crashing them into the ground. Always that music that sounds like shouting and large things dying. All the big men. Grunting and shouting and sounding like they're being attacked. Did you think all of that was inviting?"

Zachary laughed again, even harder this time.

“That’s why it’s fun,” he told her. He watched her take another big bite of her burger. “You must have worked out before.”

“I always liked yoga,” she said. But she shook her head. “But I didn’t have time to do it much.”

The way he studied her face, she could have sworn that he could simply see inside her head and flip through her memories as he liked. She kind of hoped he could. So he could know without her having to tell him that Joseph had never actually forbidden her from going to the various classes that she’d liked to drop in on. But as time went on, there’d been darker and ever more intense consequences when she came home.



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Because, clearly, she was flaunting herself in a pair of yoga pants.

She didn't really want talk about it. Zachary didn't ask.

“We'll start with some basic training and see where we end up,” he told her.

And it took her a couple of weeks to realize that when he said training, he meant all kinds of training. He trained her in the gym, yes. But he also trained her — just as he'd promised— in exactly how to fuck him.

He sat with her she joined the Club, though she kept her profile in private mode. He still made her fill out the extensive questionnaire, filled with a great number of sexual acts or interests that Romily had never heard of. She filled in her lists and then she got to see his.

That initial question and answer period still made her shiver—happily—to recall, as Zachary had taken the time to explain the things she didn't know. Then demonstrate some of the things he thought she might like, though not at the intensity he would if they were actually doing it.

By the end, she'd been so turned on she couldn't see straight.

He'd taken care of that, too.

Zachary trained her to take his cock, in her mouth and in her ass. Every day, he gave her a little bit more. He liked to work on her cocksucking capacity while using ever larger butt plugs to warm up her ass, and Romily sometimes wondered what a

previous version of her would say if this version of her went back in time and told her how unbelievably hot it all was.

It turned out that she loved the things Zachary liked to do. She liked it when it was uncomfortable, or even hurt a bit, because she knew that whatever happened, it would end in another one of the impossibly intense orgasms he handed out like candy.

The man was a twisted, dirty purveyor of happy ever afters. Romily couldn't get enough of him, or the way he touched her like he owned her—but, crucially, thought she was precious. Not a possession to be kicked around, but to be cherished, cared for, even fussed over.

It took her a solid month to manage to take the whole of his cock in her mouth and then halfway down her throat. When he finally came like that, she felt as if she'd won a prize.

Even more so when he rewarded her by burying his head between her thighs and licking her into one orgasm, complimenting her on getting that wet simply because he'd come down her throat. Then he'd fucked her hard, from behind.

It took longer to fully take him in her ass, though he had a lot of tricks to help her along, from fingers to the butt plugs he seemed to have in a never-ending supply until finally, one day, he finished there, too.

When he flooded her ass at last, she came as hard as if he been buried deep in her pussy.

“You are a wonder,” he growled at her as he carried into the bathroom for the ritual washing he insisted upon.

Because you think this is all dirty? she'd asked once, slightly afraid that it would

make him angry.

If he was angry, he didn't show it. Because I like to take care of you, little bird, he'd said. That's the whole point. He'd tipped her chin up so he could look at her intently. You need to surrender. You feel free there.

It wasn't a question but she'd nodded anyway, feeling vulnerable and cut wide open?—

But Zachary didn't see vulnerability as weakness. He treated it like strength. Like beauty.

That's how taking care of you, in all the ways I take care of you—some of them more painful than others—makes me feel, he'd said.

Romily turned that over and over inside her head for days. It had never occurred to her that they could... match like that. That he could need this thing they did as much as she did.

It made everything seem... luminous.

Even this gritty neighborhood in the damage of Oakland.

He liked that she had her therapy sessions, but he didn't like that she otherwise hid on her boat because she had only so much money. And for other reasons.

It turned out that Romily didn't much like it when Zachary didn't like something, so when he announced to her that she could take over reception for the gym, she accepted it.

"You don't really need a receptionist, though," she said.

He gazed at her, standing in the middle of the gym floor late one night, because he'd decided they needed to lift a little. There were weights scattered all around, but she knew how to use them now. The paraphernalia of stripped-down gyms like his didn't scare her anymore.

"That's where you're wrong," he replied with a laugh. "I'm good at managing a lot of things, Romily. Obsessive, you might say."

"Just a little," she murmured.

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When he laughed again, she tried not to show how much it meant to her that she could tease him. That there were no land mines, no eggshells.

“I like to pretend I like this place no frills, but the truth is, I hate managing shit like attendance and who paid and all that crap.”

“Well,” Romily said, smiling, “I happen to be excellent at that kind of stuff.”

Or she had been, once upon a time. She wondered if she was overselling herself—but when she started working the desk the next day, her worries melted away. His system was archaic, if it could even be called a system. Romily started researching gym management and payment options, and had the whole gym sorted out within a week.

He celebrated her accomplishments by tying her up on that big X above his bed and introducing her to his favorite whip.

Romily cherished those marks she’d earned until they faded.

Sometimes, deep down, she wondered if she was getting too involved all over again. Wasn’t this what she did? Not that Joseph had offered anything to get involved with aside from his ego—not that she’d understood that then.

But Zachary was so different from Joseph. Night and day. She couldn’t really entertain those thoughts for long. For one thing, she actually worked. She wasn’t playing pretend at the desk. Once she set everything up, there were phones to answer and endless calls about payment plans and membership and drop in costs.

She even made a round of swag that Zachary was sure no one would want. But the vintage-looking t-shirts with the gym name stamped on the front and no other adornments sold out within a day.

He'd celebrated that, too. This time with a paddle and what he liked to call the butt plug flight, like it was fancy. He got very stern when she laughed about that in the middle of a scene and had taught her to mind her manners.

Her ass had hurt for days, and the memory made her smile.

Zachary was also incredibly stern and serious about paying her directly, every week. He paid her a generous salary. He also never acted like her lover when she was on the job. It wasn't that he pretended she was a stranger. It was clear to anyone who paid attention that they were..., whatever they were. But he never delivered those orders they both knew she'd obey. He never touched her in a way that could be deemed inappropriate, by anyone.

She didn't realize how much she appreciated this until she'd been doing it a while. Until it became clear to her that what he wanted was for her to be comfortable above all else.

In certain settings, that was. For as stern and diabolical as he was in the bedroom, he was even more wicked in the gym, where he made her sweat, relentlessly. He made her limp. He made her hurt.

Still, he took care of her after gym sessions, too. He rubbed her sore muscles and lectured her on the benefits of creatine and showed her what active recovery looked like.

And after a handful of months rolled by, Romily barely recognized herself. She had muscles. She wasn't frail any longer. She was actually strong.

She knew this was true without having to glance in the mirror, because he told her. Because he celebrated all the muscles in her body, took pride in her gains, and seemed to only want her more and more as each day passed.

One night, he went out with his friends and she decided she should stay back in her boat. It was funny, but she barely went on the boat any longer unless it was for her therapy sessions. She hadn't realized that, really. Not until she went back down to the marina and settled herself into her berth, expecting to feel at home the way she always had there.

Only to realize that it didn't feel like hers any longer.

Romily stretched out in the bed she'd once thought she'd never leave, having worked so hard to get here. She stared out the window at the sky and the lights above, trying to remember if she and Zachary had ever discussed the fact that she was spending so much time at his place. But she already knew they hadn't.

Meanwhile, she practically lived there. Maybe it was more accurate to say she did, in fact, live there. He'd gotten impatient almost immediately with her having to go get clothes from the boat, so she had a whole section of his closet. She'd learned quickly that she slept deeply with him, without so much as a hint of a nightmare. They worked together now, and it seemed to make sense to just... go upstairs afterward.

It all seemed to work seamlessly.

That probably should have alarmed her.

It was so rare to have a night to herself that Romily thought that what she really needed to do was sit here, take a breath, and ask herself if she was already fucking up. Already giving some other man too much of herself. Already making sure that this would end badly, because she obviously couldn't trust her own feelings?—

But she couldn't really connect to that line of thinking, so she fell asleep instead.

And when she woke up, there was a Viking standing over her, though he had to stoop to fit in her berth.

"Why aren't you in my bed?" he demanded, looking... surly and annoyed and so delicious she went from fast asleep to awake and hot in an instant.

Romily didn't ask him how he'd gotten into the marina, which was supposed to be locked to keep everyone who didn't live here out. Or how he'd gotten onto this boat, for that matter, without any of her neighbors questioning him when—despite everyone's preference to keep to themselves—they were still a pretty tight knit community. They didn't throw block parties but they knew who was supposed to be on their docks.

Yet she had no doubt that Zachary's talent for getting what he wanted was infinite.

And she supposed this should have scared her, that he could just show up when he felt like it, possibly by performing an illegal entry or two — but she wasn't scared, she was happy he was here. Besides, she hardly had a leg to stand on, given the way they'd met.



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She smiled at him. “I don’t actually like your bed that much when you’re not in it,” she told him.

His grin flashed in the dark, a dangerous promise. Just the way she liked it.

As she lay there in the cozy V birth, watching him sleepily, he stripped off without another word. She got to behold the glory of him that never got old for her. He was tattooed, beautiful, so much a man that he made her ache all over. She could feel herself, slippery and ready for him, immediately.

Then Zachary crawled into the bed with her, where he barely fit, and made her hold on to the shelf above her bed as best she could. While he fucked her so intensely that she was surprised when she actually woke up again the next morning.

She didn’t sleep on the boat again.

By the fourth month, she’d even come to appreciate all the running he did, though there was really only jogging for him when she tried to match his pace. Still, they did laps together at the strangest hours, because it was safe when he was there. While Oakland slept, and the Bay slumbered, they ran together in the dark and it felt like the two of them against the world.

For a girl who never felt she had anyone, not even while she was married — maybe especially not then — this was some heady stuff.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” said one of the gym members one day, as he was checking himself in. Using the system that Romily had set up.

Romily smiled by rote, then sat up straighter. She hadn't seen this man in the gym before. Most of the men here were a lot like Zachary. They kept to themselves. They looked at her, not exactly with suspicion, but not in any forthcoming way, either. Many of them looked like they preferred the shadows.

Not this man.

He was tall, commanding. Not visibly tattooed or bearded, setting him apart from a lot of the other clientele. He was also dressed in a suit, not jeans or work trousers like many of the others. He also had a different air about him. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she could tell that this was a man who got everyone's attention, wherever he went.

The man's gaze was also assessing in a way that seemed to penetrate, deep into her. It wasn't quite sexual, she thought, though there was something about it that reminded her of Zachary's stern appraisal. She felt her breath pattern change, like he was changing the air around them.

She glanced at the screen and saw his name. Frederick Hill.

"It's nice to meet you, too," she replied, and then when she smiled again in her usual polite fashion, he didn't smile back.

"I hope that when the Club opens in a physical space, you'll enjoy it," he said. And though she thought she covered the way everything inside of her seized—because wasn't that the name of that app? How did this person know — his uncompromising mouth curved. "With Zachary, of course. I didn't mean to alarm you. Your private information is safe. I'm the founder. And Zachary's friend."

"Oh," Romily said, flustered, and then she couldn't look at him directly.

It wasn't because she was embarrassed. It was because she understood that assessing look, now. She understood that like a lot of the men she'd seen here, but had only speculated about, this man absolutely played the kinds of games that Zachary liked.

She doubted she could look up again if her life depended on it, but she knew the exact second when Zachary came in in the main part of the gym.

"Stop doing your dom shit all over my place of business," Zachary growled, but Romily could hear what sounded like genuine affection and laughter in his voice.

"Seems like you found yourself a prize," Frederick said.

"I sure have," Zachary agreed, still in that growly voice. "And I don't share, so back off."

Frederick only laughed. "Don't you?" he asked. "Isn't that interesting?"

"Did you come all the way to the East Bay to run your mouth or to get a workout in?" Zachary demanded, and they both laughed.

The two of them walked back into the main part of the gym, where there was a rudimentary locker room. Though when Romily snuck a look, Zachary caught her gaze—and those eyes of his gleamed.

Later that night, she sat on the couch Zachary's living room and looked out over the marina. Sometimes it made her a little dizzy to think about how much her life had changed in so short a span of time—and this time, for the first time, for the better.

She knew all about life changing too fast and in the wrong direction.

Sometimes she liked to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming this, but

Zachary had caught on to her and there was always a little bit of punishment when that happened. Sometimes, therefore, she pinched herself on purpose when she knew he could see her because she liked those punishments. Or she liked how they ended, anyway.

Though she suspected that once he caught onto that, he would make them more unpleasant all around. The man took these things seriously. She could trust and believe that he would deliver what he'd promised.

It was amazing what a difference that made. How safe it allowed her to feel.

She watched him move around the kitchen, preparing their dinner. He did not eat burgers in dive bars every night of the week as she might have been tempted to imagine. Like everything else, Zachary took food very seriously. He liked his fuel to be both nutritious and tasty, and did not think much of her attempts in that direction.

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Unlike Joseph, he didn't throw a tantrum when he discovered that Romily didn't have a skill she'd never claimed to have in the first place.

She thought it was progress that it no longer made her feel uneasy. Just... bemused.

He also didn't think much of her dietary practices, and had taken it upon himself to make sure that she properly fueled herself for the demands she—and he—put upon her body. It was distressing to discover that he was right. She felt much better, all the time. She had energy to spare.

Plus, what he made was always delicious.

“So that app is actually a club,” she said when they sat down to eat at the table in the corner of his kitchen. She felt that blue gaze of his move over her, but when she glanced up from the plate he'd put before her, he was looking at his own food. “And there's going to be a real club. That people go to and do... these things we do.”

“Do you find that intriguing?” he asked.

When he looked up this time, that blue gaze caught her. But then, all of him caught her. The sharp planes of his face. That dark beard. When he'd only been her fantasy, she'd thought he was too perfect to be real. Now that she knew him intimately, she still thought he was perfect. But also real.

By now, she knew better than to answer questions he asked her without thinking them through.

“I don’t know how it makes me feel,” she said after a moment. “Maybe a little intrigued. Maybe worried.” When his brow lifted, she blew out a breath. “That there will be expectations of me.”

Zachary put down his fork and studied her for a moment across the table. He reached out that big hand of his and she took it at once, then studied the tattoos on his arm. On that perfectly defined forearm.

“The only expectations that will ever be set for you are mine, Romily,” he told her. “And, I hope, your own. What would there be to worry about?”

“I don’t know.”

He didn’t change his expression. He didn’t tense in any way. He simply waited, and she sighed, because she knew already. She knew better, in fact.

One thing that made this relationship so different from anything else she’d ever experienced in her life was that Zachary demanded total honesty. Sometimes it took some work to get to it, but he insisted upon it. And sooner or later, he always got it.

If you lie to yourself, you’re lying to me by default, he had told her once during a particularly intense scene. And then where does that leave us?

I thought this was supposed to be fun, she had thrown at him, furious and not exactly hurt, but coming apart against boundaries she hadn’t even known were in her head.

But he had, of course.

You’ve heard that saying, haven’t you? He had crouched down next to her, where he’d tied her to his footboard. ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’ Why

would that be any different in a power exchange like this? We pay for our pleasure, but I like to think that the price is worth it.

She liked to think that too. Maybe not in the middle of the scene she was confronted by a parade of her own demons, but a girl couldn't have everything.

Here at the table, he waited. He didn't take his hand back. He didn't punish her. He never did, not in the moment. He would assess the situation later and mete out punishment as he saw fit. And it was always very clear to her when he was punishing her because he wanted to turn her on and when he was punishing her because he wanted her to get in touch with her emotions the only way she could.

The thing about Zachary was that he was always, always perfectly clear.

"You talk a lot about training," Romily said, haltingly. "I guess in my darkest moments I wonder what you're training me for. You told your friend you don't share. Is that true?"

"It's true right now," Zachary replied, his gaze steady. "If sharing is something that we both think is hot and we negotiate a scene that works within our hard limits, I wouldn't say no."

"Do you want to share me?" she asked, she didn't realize until she said it how much of her heart was in her voice.

But Zachary did. Something changed in that endless blue of his gaze. He switched the way their hands were touching, lacing his fingers with hers.

"I don't," he told her. "But I'm kinky as fuck, Romily. And you are too. So I'm never going to say never to anything that comes up. But between you and me? That's not really on my list."

“Good,” she said, in more of a rush than she intended. “It’s not on my list either. For either one of us.”

The way he looked at her left her feeling something like shaken. “Noted.”

He went back to eating, but he didn’t let go of her hand. And she supposed that she should have been surprised that he could eat with his left hand as easily as he did with his right. She really should have known already that he was wholly ambidextrous.

She had certainly experienced it.



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:20 am*

“Sex clubs are fun,” Zachary told her. “For one thing, it’s always nice to meet people who share common interests.” He grinned when he said that. “Sometimes a public scene scratches an itch that nothing else can. Maybe some night when Frederick opens his place, we’ll go and play. But there’s no pressure.”

“You’re the expert,” she said. She returned her attention to the dinner he’d made. “Out of curiosity, and really only out of curiosity, how many women have you treated like this before?”

“How many have I trained?” he asked.

She remembered how deliberated he’d been with that word, back at the beginning. “Is that what this is?”

“Very few.” Zachary didn’t look away. “But what I think you’re really asking me is how many women I’ve had an exclusive relationship with for months at a time, to the point where she is already kind of living with me. And the answer is none. Just you.”

And that felt... gigantic. It felt like a sea change. Like those stormy nights on the boat when she couldn’t tell if the boat was still in its slip or if it had floated out to sea and she’d wondered if it would be better if it just sank.

This felt a whole lot like that. But not exactly as dark.

And he was watching her that intensity of his that made everything in her hum. It made her pussy ache. Because there was no intensity between them that wasn’t sexual.

But that wasn't quite right, she knew. It was that everything about them was connected to their dynamic and their dynamic was inherently sexual. He had looked at her when they were grocery shopping the week before, done nothing but look at her in a particular way, and she'd practically had an orgasm in the produce aisle.

This was who they were.

Just you, he had said.

But she couldn't go there. She couldn't take it on board.

She looked away, and she pulled her hand from his, too. Because she suddenly had a desperate need to cut her meat.

And hours later, when he locked her in chains and played a bit too much with his crop, by her reckoning—until she sobbed from the pain of it and then sobbed because he made her come repeatedly—she didn't say a word.

That was her penance.

When he tucked up against him, cuffing her the way she liked and adding the blindfold she'd come to depend on, she nestled her head against his heart. Then she waited for him to go to sleep, breathed him in, and whispered I'm sorry, directly into his skin.

## Chapter Eight

She was a mystery and Zachary didn't actually like a mystery. Not one he couldn't solve, anyway.

Give him all the puzzles in the world and he'd figure them out. He was good at it. His

talent for finding creative solutions was how he created the scenes and scenarios that drove them both wild. It was how he'd navigated the often rocky path following a stint in prison. It was all the same thing, to his mind. All it took was being observant, paying attention, and using context to connect things that didn't seem to go together at first glance.

But this was different. He couldn't solve a mystery if he didn't have all the clues. And six months into this thing with Romily, she still wasn't giving him all of her.

They both knew it.

He was who he was, so he kept pushing it.

But every time he did, she would take everything he gave her beautifully. She would show him all of that love and trust and honesty in her gaze, that shining gold that had changed his life. She would suffer for him and obey him perfectly and even as she did it, he knew that she was holding back.

Zachary could admit that there was some arrogance involved. Maybe he shouldn't have simply assumed that because he wanted literally everything, that limitless connection, she would too.

And he was still too arrogant, because when he thought about it, he believed she did want those things. If only he could figure out how to lead her where they both wanted—needed—to go.

Of course, he wouldn't be who he was if he wasn't arrogant as fuck. Some called it overbearing—though Romily simply melted into him and called him sir.

On the one hand, this was entirely his own fault for breaking all of his own rules. On the other hand, Zachary really didn't like losing. He wasn't built for it.

“What’s got you all worked up?” his friend Arlo asked in the middle of one particularly revolting session in the gym. They were in between sets, lying on the floor, possibly wishing for death.

“I don’t get worked up,” Zachary growled.

“Not usually,” Arlo said with a laugh. “So I’m guessing it’s a woman.”

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Arlo was a dangerous fucker. As a dangerous fucker himself, Zachary knew that type recognized type. Arlo had turned up in the neighborhood a few years back and didn't think the fancy gym in his fancy Brooklyn Basin apartment building had what he needed. He'd come into the gym and praised the lack of bullshit treadmills.

Over time, Zachary had also come to recognize that Arlo was kinky as fuck, too. Sooner or later that shit always made itself clear. Most of his regulars in the gym were on the Club app, these days. Arlo Finn distinguished himself by being one of the few men Zachary had ever met that made him think that hell, Zachary might actually lose a fight if it came to that.

Not that he intended to put that to the test.

"What would you know about getting worked up over woman," Zachary said now, with a laugh. "You work them over but that's about it."

"We're not talking about me." Arlo sat up. "Looks like your pretty little receptionist has you tied in knots."

"The pretty little receptionist is perfect," Zachary muttered, jack-knifing up and onto his feet. "It's me that's the problem. Always wanting more. Always wanting everything."

"That's basically what wanting submission means," Arlo said with a laugh. "Go easy, brother."

That struck a chord with Zachary, especially once the brutal workout was done and

he had access to more oxygen.

It was true that submission was a yielding of everything. A true exchange. At least the kind of submission that he'd always dreamed about, the sort that fit his dominating like a hand in a glove. The kind of submission that he felt that he and Romily were so close to experiencing together. He could feel them right there, on the verge of it.

But the truth was, that didn't happen in a vacuum. The kind of power exchange he wanted didn't simply present itself. It was something they could only create together. That meant that if he wanted her to follow him over that last boundary, he needed to be willing to lead her where he wanted her to go.

And much as he loved to fuck, there were some things that some bondage and a butt plug couldn't solve. Little as he wanted to admit that.

How could he expect Romily to bare her soul when he hadn't done the same? If he didn't show her the way, how would she know how to walk it? Maybe the mystery he should have been focused on solving was himself.

That was why, on a pretty Bay Area Saturday morning, Zachary packed her into his car—the one he parked next to the gym that no one around here dared vandalize, speaking of dangerous fuckers—and drove her across the water. He took her into San Francisco and then out again on the other side.

Then he drove her deep into the redwoods, where everything smelled like eucalyptus, deep shade, and hints of rosemary.

“I grew up here,” he told her as they drove through one of Marin County's sweet little small town main streets. Self-consciously quaint these days, no doubt, but nostalgia didn't much care about progress. It saw what it wanted. “I never knew my father. He

was gone before I could walk.”

“Oh.” She frowned when she looked at him, her gold eyes filled with the kind of sympathy he didn’t want. “Did he die, or...?”

“He’s dead now,” Zachary said, a little flatly. He tried to get back to something a little steadier. “Back then, he just left. He fucked off to New Mexico, ruined other people’s lives, and died alone. By the time I hunted him down, it was already done and dusted.” And probably lucky for his father, given how edgy Zachary had been when he’d come out of prison. “That’s not the story I’m telling, though, it’s just a little background.”

Romily smiled at him. “I guess that’s good. It’s not a very happy story.”

He looked over at this woman who had turned his careful life on end. She turned her head again, staring out at the neighborhood they were driving through. He couldn’t blame her. Larkspur looked like something out of an enchanted forest. Mt. Tamalpais loomed high above bungalows tucked away in the dark shadows of the trees all around. Some were modern and gleamed with their newness. Others looked as if they’d been left untouched since the 1960s. It always seemed damp on some of these roads, mysterious and lush. It looked like the sort of forest that ought to be enchanted.

The reality was a different story.

And he couldn’t ask her to tell him all the dark things that lurked in her if he wasn’t prepared to share his own. Honesty was nothing more than a gesture if it didn’t go both ways. Zachary had always thought that control could never be absolute without a clear-eyed understanding of his own vulnerabilities.

He knew it was time he put his money where his mouth was—and what shocked him was how difficult it was, even when he knew it needed doing.

His respect for Romily and her beautiful, near-total surrender grew with every word he uttered.

“There were a bunch of boyfriends who came and went when I was little,” Zachary told her as light filtered through the trees far above, leaving them both dappled. “They were mostly forgettable, but then there was Pete.”

He didn’t even like to say that name, but Zachary forced himself to keep going. “Pete was a boyfriend for a while, then he was my stepfather. The important thing that you should know about Pete is that he was violent as hell when he was drunk. And when he wasn’t drunk, he was a dick. But he and my mom had some kind of connection. It didn’t matter what he did. How many times he beat her up. How many things they broke. They couldn’t stay away from each other.”

Beside him, Romily made a low noise of sympathy, and normally Zachary was allergic to that kind of thing. One of the reasons he and Frederick were so tight was because Frederick, as Zachary’s lawyer, had never insulted his client with sympathy about the things Zachary had dealt with in the past. They’d met when Zachary was dismissed by most as an ex-con, but that wasn’t Frederick’s way. He’d always been about solutions.

Zachary had trusted him implicitly. Still did.

But sympathy from the woman sitting next to him, smelling like jasmine with her dark hair braided back from her face, felt like a kiss.

He wanted to stop the car and show her how that felt, but he knew if he did he wouldn’t keep going. And he’d promised himself he would do this.

So he kept going. “They followed the same pattern over and over again. The same cycle. The same highs and the same predictable lows. He would leave sometimes, or



she would throw him out. As I got older, I realized that a lot of the push and pull was because he couldn't keep it in his pants. And I guess he didn't bother to conceal it. However it went, she always knew. And that would turn into another war until he stormed off, leaving blood and broken glass behind him every time. We'd clean it up just in time for him to turn up again. There was always some sob story and the next thing I knew, there he was again, sitting in the armchair in the living room, drinking his beers and calling my mother names."

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When he glanced at Romily again, she was staring at him, wide-eyed. “I can’t imagine you tolerating that,” she said softly. “I don’t mean that as a critique. It’s just hard to picture, knowing you now.”

“For a long time, he was bigger than me,” Zachary said, with a smile that hurt his mouth a little. “But believe me, I didn’t tolerate it. I got my ass kicked. A lot.” He shook his head, not a fan of all those memories. “Then I started taking a boxing class in high school. That got me hitting the weight room, too. Suddenly, I went from a scrawny kid to the makings of a man, and that did not go down well with Pete.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Romily said.

She wasn’t looking around anymore. She was looking at him. Only at him, and when she reached over to rest her hand on his leg, he felt something in him almost... ease at that.

It was the strangest sensation. Zachary couldn’t remember the last time a woman had tried to soothe him.

He liked it, though it felt strange and marvelous and a lot like he was on a kind of verge again, only this time he wasn’t sure he really knew what was on the other side.

That was new, too.

The only thing to do was to keep going, so that was what he did. “One night my senior year, Pete got good and liquored up and actually challenged me. By that point he’d been dancing around that for a while, but that night he was ready. He jumped me

when I walked in the door.”

Zachary remembered the confusion. The chaos. How long it felt like it took him to respond when it was likely only a few seconds. “My mother was screaming. I knew the last thing she wanted was for me to fight him, but I was done. I was eighteen. Truth was, I thought I was pretty tough. So I beat the hell out of him, and I’m not going to lie to you, Romily. I enjoyed it. I threw him out the front door and I tossed his shit out behind him.”

“That seems like a fitting ending,” Romily said fiercely.

He smiled at her and reached over to run his fingers down her cheek, over her lips. So he could get a little of that gold he could see in her eyes into his bloodstream somehow.

“It would have been, but it wasn’t the end,” he said. “A couple of weeks later, he turned up again, but this time he didn’t come for me. He went for my mother. Beat her unconscious.”

Zachary still remembered pulling up to the house in that piece of shit beater he’d been so proud of, because it was his. He’d bought it used, but he’d bought it himself. He remembered frowning at the side door because it wasn’t set right, there against the house.

He’d been halfway to the house before he realized it was because the door had been half-torn off its hinges.

And he’d known. Immediately. He’d known exactly what had happened.

Just like he knew that it was his fault.

“When I got home that night I found her broken on the floor in pool of her own blood,” he told Romily, and this part was harder. But there was no stopping now. “I knew exactly who did it, of course, so after I took my mother to the hospital, I went looking for Pete in the crap bar he liked to hang out in with his degenerate friends.”

Romily leaned a little closer. Zachary shook his head, and blew out a breath.

“He was waiting for me. He came at me with a tire iron. I got it away from him and when he made a move toward me the next time, I swung it.”

It had been so many years now. It was a matter of public record. Still, this was Romily. He realized in that moment—or maybe he’d been dreading this moment because he’d always known—that this really could be the thing that pushed her away from him forever —

But wasn’t that the point? Wasn’t that what he was always trying to tell her?

If they couldn’t be honest with each other, what were they doing? Nothing, was the answer. Just playing games to get off and calling it something more profound than it was. There was nothing wrong with that. Zachary knew all kinds of people who liked this kind of lifestyle as a kind of spicy topping on their otherwise vanilla lives.

He thought that was great. For them.

But deep down, he’d always believed—he’d always hoped—that there was more.

Romily was the only one who had allowed him to see that it could happen. That they could make it real. If it required this level of honest vulnerability, surely that was a small price to pay.

Except it didn’t feel small.

And he could acknowledge that it was probably a good thing that his arrogant ass was getting to experience this. It was humbling as shit.

He'd have to remember that the next time she got avoidant during a punishment or pinched herself because she wanted to spark one. Not that he'd change a single thing he did, but he'd remember. He'd sympathize.

Knowing him, he'd make sure to use it against her when it suited him, too.

But first he had to do this, even if she decided she was done with him.

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“I hit him hard,” Zachary told her, harder than necessary, because he had to get it out. “Probably broke his arm. But he also stumbled back and hit his head on the corner of the building. Too hard. It was concrete. He was dead within minutes.”

He waited, trying not to tense, but Romily didn’t take her hand away from his body. She was still watching him like she was waiting for the next part of the story. She hadn’t recoiled.

A moment passed and if anything, she moved closer again.

Zachary felt a kind of tectonic shift inside him, like old fault lines disappearing. He’d told this story too many times to count. He’d never stalled or stuttered.

He’d also never cared what the person listening to this story thought of it. Or of him.

“I went to prison on a manslaughter charge,” he told her, and it wasn’t as hard to say. “I got five years, got out three. When I got out, I got to see my mom again. She’ll never be the same after that night. She walks with a cane. Her speech is distorted.” He glanced over toward the passenger seat. “Shewantsto love me because I’m her son, but when it comes down to it, she doesn’t forgive me. She can’t. Because at the end of the day I killed the man she loved. We both have to live with that.”

“The man she loved was a monster,” Romily whispered.

“To my mother, I’m the monster,” Zachary replied, and he felt steadier by the moment. “And I accept that. There are some consequences that you can’t come back from. I don’t regret killing Pete. I wish I did because I figure that would make me a

better human being. When I think about him, I only ever wish I could have gotten rid of him sooner. I don't regret that either. The only thing I do regret is that I made my mother unhappy."

"I think," Romily said quietly, and after a moment of quiet with only the sounds his car made between them, "that your mother is afraid to thank you for what you did, or even acknowledge it, because it then she'd also have to acknowledge what happened to her."

Zachary felt that as if she reached into his chest, wrapped pretty fingers around his heart, and yanked it out.

For a long moment he couldn't speak. He followed the winding road around and around, until he pulled into the driveway he'd been aiming for. The driveway he could find in his sleep. Once he parked, however, he had to take a minute.

"I want you to meet her," he told her. Maybe he meant that he needed her to, but that was feeling a lot like the same thing right now. "She's part of me no matter how she feels about any of this."

"Of course I want to meet your mother," Romily replied.

Though there was something new in those gold eyes of hers. A kind of wariness, but he'd expected that—just directed more at him and what he'd done and less toward his mother, who he'd always seen as a victim in all of this. Maybe the only victim.

He was going to have to think about that.

In the meantime, it was something to usher this woman into the house where he'd grown up, though he didn't remember a time that he'd ever really been a kid. A place where so many terrible things that happened. Some by his own hand.

It was something to watch Romily sit and talk with his mother, who still couldn't look Zachary in the eyes.

"It was so nice to meet you," Romily said when they stood up to leave.

Zachary watched his mother's eyes flash with that old fury. She could never quite mask it. It reminded him of the fights she'd started here. The way she'd poked and prodded Pete, never leaving well enough alone, like she wanted the explosion more than she wanted peace.

He hadn't remembered that part in a long time either.

"Zachary always did like a project," his mother told Romily. There was even more of that temper on her face, then. "Careful, though. He doesn't like to solve his puzzles. He likes to smash them."

"See you next week, Mom," Zachary said, without giving her a reaction. He knew that was what she wanted.

He wasn't particularly surprised that the ride back down that hill was silent.

"Did... what happened to her make her mean?" Romily asked hesitantly.

"Sometimes I like to tell myself that I did," Zachary said, because that's what he would have said a week ago. But everything felt different now. Even this. "The fact of the matter is, she's always been as toxic as Pete was. Just less violent."

"Yet you see her every week."

"I bought that house. I didn't buy it for me. I wouldn't live there again if you paid me." He glanced at her, but she was looking out the front window. "When I got out of



prison and made some money, this was the only amend that I could make. The only one that she'd accept."

They rode across the Golden Gate Bridge, the famous deep red metal stretching above them and the Bay its usual glory on all sides. There were boats out, and the bayside towns gleaming pretty in the distance. San Francisco gleamed like a jewel ahead of them.

"I know why she said what she did about puzzles," Romily said, as if she was being careful with her words. "But why did she say I was a project?"

"My mother is under the impression that I like broken things," he told her, matter-of-factly. "Broken women, especially."

She sat up straighter. “Is that true?”

Zachary considered that for a moment. Or rather, he considered how to say what he wanted to say to her.

“Not really,” he said after he’d thought about it. “I don’t like random broken things. Sometimes, when I meet a woman who has some stuff going on in her life, I think I can fix it. I’m pretty sure that’s just part of who I am. My mother only sees the bossiness. I’ll even admit to arrogant. She liked to call it mysavior complex. But it’s not a compulsion. It’s individual. And there’s usually a deeper element than that.”

“So what you’re saying,” Romily said quietly, “is that you fix a number of broken women. That it’s a habit. Not a compulsion, but... common. For you.”

“No,” he said, and it was a challenge to keep his voice steady and calm, “I’m not saying that. Because there are some kinds of broken that can’t be fixed. Not by me. Not by my magical cock. Not by my demands, my kinks, or anything I have to give. For a long time, I got entirely too involved with that kind of broken.”

“Zachary,” Romily said, and she sounded almost frantic, though her golden eyes were steady when she looked at him. “I don’t want to be one of your projects. Some puzzle you solve and then smash.”

“You’re not fucking broken,” he threw back at her.

They were somewhere in San Francisco. He didn’t care where. He pulled the car over to the side of the road—even though it was steep and now it was almost as if they

were lying down, or stalled going up one side of a roller-coaster.

Probably a decent analogy, but that didn't stop him.

He turned to look at her across the center console. "Have you been through some shit? Clearly. But nothing about you is broken, Romily. You're strong as hell. You're tough. Not only that, you're not fucking selfish like every single person we've just been talking about. Pete. My mother. The so-called projects she was referring to. Every single one of them was and is completely self-centered. That's not you."

"I don't know how you think —"

But he needed her to listen to him. "Believe me, I've met entirely too many women who look at a man with my particular obsessions and think that all they have to do is lie around and come their faces off. And yeah, that's fun. That's what the Club app is for. But this?" He moved his finger between them. "This is real, Romily. You don't just follow my commands so that you get off. We're in this together and that's what it's supposed to be like. That's how I've always thought it ought to be between two people like us. A give and take, though that's not always simple. Today I was telling you stories you tried to soothe me. Take care of me." He leaned in a little bit closer. "No one ever does that. Ever. I'm supposed to be in control of everything."

"What if I think I'm broken?" she whispered.

He reached over and put his hands around her face. "Baby, you might have been trampled on a little bit. It happens to all of us. But you're not broken. Look at you. You shine so bright and you give so much, it shouldn't be possible. Yet here you are."

"I don't know what I want," she told him then in the same rough whisper. "I don't like thinking that I'm not special to you, but at the same time?—"

“Romily,” he said, very deliberately, “I haven’t introduced a woman to my mother in too many years to count. If you’re a project for me, you’re the kind of project I intend to be working on for the rest of my life.” She sucked in a breath at that and he nodded. “Are you beginning to understand where I’m coming from here? I’ve already broken every rule I have for you.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that,” she said, her eyes wide.

“You didn’t have to ask me to do that. I wanted to do that. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted those rules.” He stroked the sides of her face. “I want this. I want us.”

“Zachary.” And he was sure that he could see tears glimmering there in her eyes. “There are so many things that you don’t know about me.”

“No shit,” he retorted. “And I’m never going to know, little bird. Unless you tell me. Are you ready for that? I just stripped myself naked in every way possible and showed you everything there is to see. All of me. Can you give me that in return?”

## Chapter Nine

Romily didn’t know what to do with herself for the rest of the ride home.

When Zachary got back to the marina and parked in his usual spot, she had the very strong urge to fling open her door and run for it.

But she suspected that he would catch her. Not only that, it wasn’t like anyone would intervene. Not in this neighborhood.

Besides, the last thing she wanted to do was cause a scene. She wasn’t sure she had that in her.

They walked across the lot towards the gym and he glanced down at her, looking as forbidding as he had way back at the beginning—it seemed like a lifetime ago now.

“I would’ve bet the whole gym on you bolting,” he said.

She made an offended sort of sound. “I’m not going to run.” But this was Zachary and it wasn’t his fault that she was... not at all who he thought she was. “Though it’s true that I thought about it.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” he said, very politely.

Too politely.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:20 am*

They walked down that alley together, in silence, while the usual sounds of a Saturday mid-morning on the Oakland waterfront swirled all around them. Then past the entrance to the gym and upstairs, just as quietly.

It was nerve-racking.

He led her inside and she expected him to start something. To raise his voice a little, maybe. Press his case. Because didn't the truth of men always come out, sooner or later? Hadn't Joseph told her that men only pretended to give a shit about women and their feelings?—

But Joseph wasn't here.

And Zachary sure as hell wasn't Joseph.

All he did was come over to her, pull her into his arms, and kiss her.

And oh, how this man could kiss.

Every slide of his tongue against hers was a revelation. It was always dirty. It was always profoundly carnal, but this time he didn't take it deeper. He didn't slide his hand down between her legs when they both knew she was already wet.

He just kissed her and kissed her as if that was the only thing he could think of to do.

Until she was the one writhing against him.

“Say please,” he told her, his mouth against hers, his beard a sweet scratch against her skin. “Or I won’t consider giving you this cock. This magical, problem-solving cock.”

And she could only shudder, because maybe she’d been protesting too much in the car. His cock had certainly seemed to turn her life around. She wanted more.

She always wanted more.

“Please,” Romily begged him. Because everything made more sense when he was inside of her. Maybe this would make sense too. “Please, Zachary. Please, sir.”

He stepped back and smiled, his eyes stern. “Naked,” he told her. “On the bed. On all fours.”

Romily’s heart kicked at that. She practically ran across the apartment, though she knew better than to fling her clothes around as she went. Zachary was extremely neat and encouraged her to be, too. And his encouragements always did the trick.

She had goosebumps all over her arms and down her back as she went to the bedroom and took off her clothes. She folded them neatly and put them away in her area, as he always demanded. Encouraged, she corrected herself. Because encouragements came with pleasant consequences. Straight demands for high standards that could only end in failure? Not so much.

Only when she was naked and everything was sorted did she go to the bed and climb to the center of it, where she got on all fours as he requested.

And then waited.

He came in and smoothed a hand down the length of her spine, slow and steady. Then

curled his palm under to test her pussy. He found her the way they both knew that he would. Ripe. Hot. Already melting.

Then he set about chaining her to that imposing headboard, one hand and then the other.

He didn't speak. She found herself trembling the way she always did at the beginning of these scenes. It started deep inside of her and as it grew it became less of a tremble and more of that electric current.

Zachary was walking around the bed, studying her. He added a blindfold. He liked her to sleep in one and she'd discovered she like it too. She slept so deeply now. The nightmares didn't dare venture close when Zachary was beside her. He usually woke her up by thrusting himself as deep inside her as he could, where it always took her body a moment to respond.

They both liked that little scrape of pain. How it woke her up into a shiver of reaction and delight, and how quickly it became that roaring inferno—the need that only grew between them.

Romily wasn't sure how she'd lived without it.

She felt a cool bit of pressure on her asshole and realized it was his finger, at first. Then the cold caress of the lubricate he used, and he didn't go sparingly. That was a clue. She was slightly prepared when he slid one of the plugs he loved so much inside her, a big one this time. As big as he was, she thought.

She had to breathe hard and shift her hips around to try to come to terms with it.

The fact he let her do that—let her move and whine a little and shift her position to accommodate all that pressure and fullness—told her that he had a whole lot worse



planned. That made a whole new set of goosebumps prick to life all over her.

When she settled down some, she felt his weight move onto the bed. Then she felt the chains move a little bit until he was kneeling before her with his hands on her head, bringing her mouth to his cock.

He thrust in, deep.

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As was always the way with this man, he didn't wait for her to catch up. He expected that she would. He fucked her mouth until she did.

And it was work. There was that enormous plug in her ass. Her knees were shaking, and she had to figure out a way to hold herself up. Because her hands were in those cuffs and while the chains were taut because of the way he'd angled himself, she had to figure out how to balance her arms in the air so she didn't collapse?—

But no, she thought then. That wasn't the lesson.

She was under no illusions that this wasn't, in fact, one big lesson.

The lesson today was very clearly surrender.

And when she did, when she let go, it was like everything else shifted too. His cock was deep in her throat, and she'd trained for this. For months. It was a beautiful thing to be able to take him, to be able to let him hammer into her face in the wild way he so rarely allowed himself.

That she could give this to him made her whole body shake. Romily felt herself getting wetter and hotter, and her nipples actually hurt they were so hard.

Still he kept going, moving that enormous cock even deeper into her throat. She felt when his hands moved to her hair and fisted there, and then almost felt as if she ascended to a different level entirely when he began to come, pouring himself down her throat.

She felt herself coming too though she should have fought to prevent it, her ass clenching hard on the plug, and the rest of her gone taut and needy. She couldn't have stopped herself if her life depended on it.

He came and came and she gulped it all down, even as her own body shook.

Zachary pulled back and let her hang there with the chains stretched out. He smoothed his hand over her hair, her hot face flushed and pressed into his thigh.

"Lick me clean," he told her.

Romily sought out his cock with her mouth, doing as he'd demanded. She licked up anything she could find, anything to get her mouth on him again.

She could feel herself stirring all over again and better still, him too.

Zachary moved again, leaving her with only another stroke of her hair. She stayed where she was, ass in the air and her face down on the mattress, her arms stretched out on either side and canted forward.

She tried to imagine the picture she made. What he was looking at. But she knew that whatever angle he chose, he found this beautiful. He found her beautiful. He had told her explicitly, and repeatedly, that there was nothing that could possibly occur between them as they brought these things out of each other that he wouldn't find precious.

Then she wondered if this was the lesson too. If this time he needed her to believe.

He came back and she felt his hands on her again. He tested that plug, and she moaned a bit as he played with it. Then he reached between her legs and ran his fingers through all that molten heat he found there, finding her clit and pinching it

though he would know perfectly well that she was oversensitive after coming.

Zachary confirmed that by laughing slightly when she jolted. Because they both knew that it was like a knife's edge, what made her uncomfortable and what made her ache with yearning. And all he had to do —

But then he did it. He pinched her once more and this time, all she felt was heat.

He moved up her body, though he didn't shift her body this time. He simply slid himself beneath her, his mouth fastening to one breast. Then the other. He went back and forth, and when she was actually sighing, pressing her breasts toward that wicked mouth of his, he pulled back.

Next she felt the pinch of clamps as he fastened those vicious little claw teeth to one nipple at a time.

And it was like she... panicked. Everything inside her was noise and sensation, pain and heat?—

“Breathe,” he told her.

She tried. She really tried.

But all he did was test the clamps to make sure they held—sending more electricity charging through her, and then he was moving again. He spread her legs apart even wider, then lifted her up.

Everything felt upside down, but then she realized that he was lying down on the bed and lowering her pussy directly onto his face.

So she was more or less sitting on his face while chained the bed, that plug in her ass

and the nipple clamps still burning.

All Romily could do was make the strangest, most guttural noises. She could hardly tell where her own scalding heat ended and that clever, wicked mouth of his began.

He teased her and he taunted her. He brought her so close to the edge, so close that her hips moved of her own accord and the pain in her nipples was more like a guiding light, and she was right there?—

And then he was gone.

“Romily,” he said, and now it seemed as if he was lying beside her, maybe. She couldn’t see him, though she suspected that even if she could, she wouldn’t be able to tell where she was anymore. His voice was everything. Dark and rich. “I think it’s time you told me about your marriage.”

### Chapter Ten

Romily felt herself quiver, everywhere.

As if he was still using her body as his own, personal sex toy. As if he was still inside her, using only his voice—as impossible to ignore as the plug in her ass or the clamps on her nipples.

Maybe the point was that he didn’t have to touch her, now, to make her feel the way he wanted her to feel. That all he had to do was exist.

She felt that same old electric charge seem to light her up all over again. At the same time, there was something in her that wanted to fight it. But even as she tensed, she remembered where she was. She was bound. Blindfolded. There was that inescapable butt plug. He had already fucked her mouth and licked her pussy, and yet she had no doubt that there was more in store.

Zachary never didonething. He preferred a build. A cascade. One experience leading into the next and making it hotter and more intense. Romily knew this ride had a ways to go—and today, apparently, he thought that the intimacy should be more than

physical.

There wasn't a single part of her that wanted to tell him about her marriage.

Not one part.

Yet she wasn't helpless in this. She wasn't trapped. She reminded herself—as the panic began to stir in her—that all she had to do was tell him to stop.

She knew that exit strategy was available to her. It always was. She knew that he would release her immediately. And she didn't think that if she pulled the eject button that would be the end of them, either. Romily knew Zachary well enough by now to know that he wasn't punitive like that.

Which wasn't to say there wouldn't be some kind of reckoning.

She opened her mouth to do it, to say she wanted to stop—but no sound came out.

And she was so aware of him there beside her. Waiting.

No doubt studying every expression that crossed her face and every tremor that moved over her body.

Romily had no doubt that he would wait forever if he had to. She moved in her chains. She shifted her weight. Her breath was doing what it liked, and she knew he would be taking note of that too, but the panic was there and rising and —

But what it came down to was that she trusted him.

She trusted him and she proved that. Over and over again with her body. Right now her concern wasn't the various erotic torments he was putting her through but what he

wanted her to say.

Why couldn't she put her mouth to the test as well?

If what she craved was to fully surrender to this man, to fully accept the control he exerted, because she already knew that was where she bloomed — and God, how she bloomed here—then how could she disobey him emotionally?

The whole point was that she didn't get to decide where or how she surrendered to him. She got to say if it was too much, if she couldn't continue, if she truly didn't want this.

But being apprehensive and possibly even afraid of something didn't actually mean she didn't want to do it.

The real truth was that she was afraid of what would happen if she did.

Yet the promise he'd made to her was that all she had to do was what he told her, and it would be okay. Whatever it was, whatever they did, it would be okay.

And everything that had happened in the months they'd been together had proven that to be true.

He had never betrayed her. How could she betray him?

This time when she exhaled, she let her whole body go limp with it.

She heard his rumble of approval from beside her, because of course he knew. She wouldn't be surprised if her struggles were obvious to him as if they danced across her skin, put into words. Or maybe tattoos like his, bold pieces of art like time stamps to mark who he had been in each moment.



“What do you want to know about my marriage?” she asked, her voice as rough as if she’d been on a sobbing jag. She felt as if she had.

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“Everything,” he replied, stern and sure.

So she didn’t worry about what he might think, what it all said about her, or any of the things that normally kept her tongue inside her own mouth and her thoughts to herself.

Romily did what he wanted her to do.

Which was to give him exactly what he’d asked for.

“I was a hostess in a restaurant in San Francisco,” she told him, clearing her throat as she paged back through the set of memories she preferred not to air out unless she was in a therapy session.

But she either trusted him or she didn’t. At the end of the day it was simple, wasn’t it?

Most complicated things were, in the end. She pushed on. “It was a pretty good job. I liked it. He was a customer and after he ate dinner that night, he waited for me to get off work asked for my number.” She sighed a little as she said that. “That could have been creepy. I’ve looked back on that a lot, wondering what red flags I missed, but there weren’t any. Not in the moment we met, or not any that I could have picked up. He wasn’t rude. He was self-deprecating and charming and funny. And so disarming. I gave him my number when he asked and he walked off, instead of getting handsy or strange or any of the other things that I thought were going to happen.”

“Did that happen a lot?” Zachary asked.

“Enough.” Romily shrugged a little, but that made the nipple clamps sharp all over again and she pulled in a sharp breath. “He called about five minutes later, while I was walking home. We talked and talked.”

She shifted a little, not because she was uncomfortable—though her breasts were on fire—but because she wanted to hear the soft clank of the chains so she could remember where she was. Not on that street in Cows Hollow. Not grinning and giddy as she walked down dark sidewalks, heedless of the danger.

Both on the streets of the city and on the other end of the phone line.

“Looking back now, all I can see are the red flags, but I didn’t see them then.” She sighed and tested her arms against the tension of her chains. “Everything was perfect. He was perfect. It was as if I’d conjured him up out of my own head, like every fairytale I never believed in as a child.”

She would have done anything in that moment tear her blindfold off and study his face, so she could see the look in his eyes. To see if she could discern any pity. Any judgment. Or any of the other uncomplimentary things he could be thinking or feeling—because he had to be thinking them. Romily was sure of it.

Because she had been so unforgivably stupid.

But she had no way to get the blindfold off. Maybe that was better.

“I grew up kind of rough,” she told him. Not an excuse, but maybe an explanation. “My parents died when I was little and the good part about that is that I don’t remember them. I think I grieved them less than some would. I can only grieve the idea of who they might have been for me, which is really just another fairy tale.”

“And the bad part?” Zachary asked quietly.

“The bad part is that I was passed around from one family member to another until I was eighteen. Never really wanted. Forever a burden. It was always really clear to me that the best course of action was to stay quiet and not to all attention to myself. To hope that no one noticed me. Because when they did, that was usually when I had to bounce around until I could impose on another family member’s charity.”

She blew out a breath, hating the memories of those years. Always shrinking herself down and trying to stay small and inobtrusive. Always having to stay sweet and obliging or she’d be accused of ingratitude. Usually being told she ungrateful anyway.

“I was happy to get away from that,” she said now. “I left all of them as soon as I could and I never went back. I waited tables until I had enough money to move to San Francisco, because if I never see Modesto again it will be way too soon. I was twenty when I met Joseph. Or when he found me, I guess you could say.”

Romily shuddered then—and not the way she did anytime Zachary looked at her.

She felt his hand moving over her jaw. Her cheek. She pressed her face into his palm, because that was what centered her. Him.

He kept her safe. Even while she talked him through a nightmare.

“It took him six weeks,” she told him, her voice low. “Six weeks of being the answer to every prayer I’d never dared say out loud, because who was listening? It was a dream come true in every possible way. I couldn’t wait to marry him. The life we had planned was better than anything I could ever have imagined.”

It was funny, though. She couldn’t really remember what that planned fantasy life was now. Too much had happened, and then she’d left the reality of that life. Now there was Zachary. So when she looked back, all she could really access was that

she'd been so sure that she and Joseph would be happy.

That everything would feel like those six weeks had. A mad rush of giddy perfection.

And today when she looked back, she discovered that she no longer hated that twenty year old girl she'd been. She no longer despaired of her, thinking she was such an idiot and so blind. It wasn't a character flaw to trust a person who claimed they loved her.

It was on him that he never had. That it had all been a sick game.

Today, Romily just felt sorry for the version of her who had believed in someone for the first time in her life.

"We got married one day at the courthouse, just us, because that was so special. He told me he'd planned our honeymoon and it was supposed to be beyond romantic. I was so excited." Romily had to clear her throat again. "But the moment we got married, things got weird. He drove us down the coast to Monterey, to a hotel he'd picked out and had been telling me about for weeks, but we didn't talk much on the drive. That was strange. Different. I was a little overwhelmed and still pretty giddy myself, so I thought he was too. But I was wrong."

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She let out a shaky sort of breath. “It started the minute we got in the hotel room. He just... changed. At the time I thought it was like he became a different person, but over time I realized that was the real person. That the man I’d met was the mask.” A sound escaped her, some kind of laugh—though it was hollow. “He knew how to pick his victims, that’s for sure. Because I’d never had family that was mine. I’d never had anyone. He was all I had. I think he picked me because he knew that no matter what he did, I wouldn’t leave. And he was right.”

Romily only realized the tears were leaking from the corners of her eyes when she felt them pull in the place where Zachary’s palm still fit tight to her cheek.

“He didn’t hit me at first,” she told him, and she felt Zachary’s hand tense, ever so slightly. She thought maybe she should stop—but she couldn’t. She wanted it all out. “I’d like to think that if he had right off the bat I would have left, but the reality is that I don’t think I would have. I think I would have convinced myself it was a one-off. Or my fault. He didn’t hit me in the beginning. But the thing is, he didn’t have to.”

She heard herself snifle, but there was no helping it. Except she heard a low sort of rumble from Zachary, a kind of soothing reminder that this was nothing now but a story she was telling. And that he was with her.

It turned out, that helped a lot.

“He ripped me apart,” she told him. “Everything I did was wrong. I was wrong. That was how it worked, especially as time went on. He never told me not to do something, he just made sure that if I did the thing he didn’t like it was so unpleasant

afterward that I never did it again. It took a while to build to actual violence. First he just threw objects. Then there was a slap here or there.”

Again, Zachary tensed. This time, it made her smile. Because if anyone could storm her own memories to defend her from the past, it would be her Viking.

“Nothing was all that damaging, just painful and upsetting. He liked to degrade me. Humiliate me. And hurt me, but never in ways that turned any of that pain into pleasure. If that makes sense.”

“It does,” Zachary told her, sounding matter-of-fact. Absolutely certain. “And I find you even more remarkable than I already did, my little bird.”

Then suddenly, she felt bright again. Strong. Joseph had made her tiny and scared, filled with doubt and shame. Zachary made her tough and resilient, and best of all, safe.

Or maybe it was that Zachary made her feel like herself, at last.

She kept going. “The first year of our marriage, I was in denial. I kept thinking I could make it better, but I couldn’t. No matter what I did, it got worse. He claimed that was my fault, of course. I thought he might be right. He made me quit my job. He didn’t understand why I wanted to leave the house without him unless it was to cheat, when I had never cheated. I had to defend everything and he made it seem like I was crazy for wanting to do those things—like go on a walk—and put our marriage at risk.”

“Breathe,” Zachary told her, his voice low and easy, penetrating the cloud of memory.

He made it almost easy to keep telling this story. Romily reminded herself that there

was a happy ending already—she ended up here, with him. Not stuck in that hell with Joseph.

“The second year, everything escalated,” she told Zachary. “He isolated me from what few friends I had left. He moved us out into a sterile, featureless community outside of the city, where was hard to meet any women my age who weren’t already mothers. That was deliberate, because he was very clear that it was my fault we didn’t have children.”

Her mouth felt dry. She swallowed, but kept going. “Every month when I got my period it would set him off. It got worse and worse by the month. By the end of third year, after I’d spent some time trying to make friends where we lived and Joseph had made sure that none of those relationships could possibly last, I busy cleaning the house one day. He had been mad at me for days, so I was trying to do a particularly good job. I cleaned everywhere, even in places I normally didn’t pay much attention to. I was proving I wasn’t lazy.”

Zachary laughed. “You are hardly lazy, Romily.”

That made her smile, but it faded as she went on. “I found this box of his that he said he kept his old high school things in. I didn’t even know what that meant. He’d never showed me, any high school things and I was too cowed by him to go look. That day was different.”

She knew why it was different. It was because she’d gotten her period in the night and Joseph had kicked her in the stomach. The force of the kick had sent her tumbling off the side of their bed, onto the floor. She’d been bruised. Disoriented—but she knew better than to try to crawl back in that bed. Or to move.

That was the day that she’d laid there, dazed and half-naked on the floor of her bedroom while her husband stood over her and ranted down at her, one terrible thing



after the next. Then he'd kicked her again and walked out.

It was the first time she had thought, with perfect clarity and very little emotion, one day, he's going to kill me.

"He roughed me up in the morning before he left for work, and I think I was feeling desperate," she told Zachary, and heard his low growl. "And that was when I found it." She laughed, but not because it was funny. It still wasn't. "It was a box of his medical records. His tonsils out when he was a boy. An appendectomy when he was older. Most importantly, a vasectomy. He'd had it done before he met. Meaning that he'd never wanted children—he just wanted me to suffer."

Again, she would have given anything to see the look on Zachary's face. All she could feel was the way his thumb moved against her cheek, but she found that was enough.

It was everything.

"So every single month of him raging at my failing to get pregnant when he knew I wouldn't..." She shook her head a little bit. "It's so psychotic that I don't even know what to say about it."

"I can think of a few things," Zachary said in a low voice, and Romily could hear the temper in his voice. Maybe it was wrong, but that made her feel safe too.

"It took me another year to plan my escape," she went on. "I had to be so careful. He controlled everything. Me, of course, but also the money and everything in the house. Still, if I was very careful, very deliberate, I could skim a tiny bit here and a tiny bit there and it all added up over time."

"And you did it."

“I did.” She loved the approval in his voice. It washed over her like a caress. “I walked out of the house one day and I never went back. I didn’t take anything with me. There was no point. I left behind anything he could trace. I only took the clothes on my back and my license. That was it. I used the cash that I had stashed away and I took BART into San Francisco, and after that, it was easy to disappear. I knew he thought I was weak and scared and fragile, so I went to the last place he’d ever think to look for me.”

She blew out a breath, because she could feel herself getting shaky. “I remembered this Marina particularly, because back when I first moved here from Modesto, I lived for about a week or so in one of the squatter marinas. I knew there was a wholesubculture on the water. The way I remembered it, was filled with the kind of people who didn’t want to be found. I thought that sounded perfect.”

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“And that’s how you got here,” Zachary said. “To me.”

“That’s the story,” Romily agreed. “So I guess you could say that technically, I’m still married. Because I don’t think I can serve divorce papers on him without an address and I don’t want him to have my address. If that’s a dealbreaker for you I understand.”

Romily did not understand, actually. It would kill her. But she felt that was the right thing to say.

Zachary laughed. “I don’t give one shit if you’re still married to that abusive fuck,” he said. “As far as I’m concerned, he lost the right to call you his wife the first time he turned on you. So that puts it about five years ago, on your wedding day. Fuck that guy.”

And Romily had only ever told this story to one other person. Her therapist. She’d done it crying and shaking, feeling so sick to her stomach and covered in shame that she’d thought she might never heal.

But Zachary made her laugh.

And then he was moving again, sliding closer to her and lifting her up so he was beneath her.

She could feel his hot, muscled body underneath hers and felt like crying again when he settled her astride him. But not because she was sad.

Because she had told him the worst thing that had happened to her—the thing she hadlethappen to her—and he was still here.

He had told her to trust him and she had and he wasstill here.

This was the first time she could remember crying actual tears of joy.

Zachary reached up and took the blindfold off, his blue eyes serious and intent as he stared up at her. He stroked her cheekbones, her cheeks. He moved his fingers over her lips.

“Thank you,” he said, in that stern, sure,comfortingtone of his. “I know that wasn’t easy. That you trusted me enough to tell me is beautiful, Romily. You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever known. I’m lucky that you chose me.”

She was...staggeredby that. She hadn’tchosenhim. He was a force of nature. He was a Viking. He had appeared out of the fog and changed her life, and what did she have to do with that?

“You chose me,” he said again, as if he could read her mind. She was already pretty confident that he could. “You know me well enough by now to know that if you told me to leave you alone I would have. Instead, you took my hand.”

He took one of her chained wrists and moved it toward him, so he could kiss her fingers. It seemed so oddly... courtly and romantic, here in this bed where they had already done unspeakable things, and would do so many more.

But it still made her melt inside. And everywhere else.

He settled his hands on her hips, shifted her up, and then lowered her with an electric intensity down the length of his cock. He watched her take him inside her body, every

hard and hungry inch.

And then he grinned that hard, beautifully merciless grin of his as she came all around him. Immediately.

At some point, he took off those nipple clamps and the sensation that charged back into those nipples gone numb, made her scream, and come even harder.

She didn't know when in all of that he released her wrists from the chains. The next thing she knew—still shuddering and lost in the grip of all that seismic glory that he had set off inside of her—he was between her legs, coming over her on the bed and holding her down with his hands.

And when he began to move, it was something else entirely.

They had fucked so many times. She assumed the rest of their lives would be spent finding new and improved ways to fuck each other silly.

But this was something else.

He was still Zachary. He gave her his weight. He kept his rhythm deep and hard. He held her arms up above her head and when she tested his grip, she couldn't move. All of that was delightful. Deliberate.

But the look on his face was new.

“Put your legs around me,” he told her.

And when she did, it was like everything that separated them melted away.

It was like they were one. No end, no beginning. Just the blue of his eyes and the

deep hard reach of his cock. The endless melting softness of her pussy and the way he let her clench her legs around him so that they moved in unison.

And when he told her to come, he did too, flooding her with so much scalding heat that her climax went on and on and on.

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When Romily slowly found her way back down to earth again, he was holding her in his arms and kissing her softly. All over her face and then down her body, pausing at her breasts to inspect her nipples. She knew he was making sure that the clamps hadn't stayed on too long.

And when he was satisfied, he also made sure to try his teeth on them. Because of course he knew that they were sensitive.

She nuzzled up against him, the way she liked to do when they woke up together in the predawn hours. Before he went down to open his gym for the diehard 5 AM crew. He was always hard when he woke up and she was always happy to assist, and the first fuck of the day was always wild and hard and breathtaking.

And afterward, it was like this. She wouldn't use the word cuddly out loud, only because she was certain her stern, beautiful Viking would take against it.

But she loved it. She loved every part of this. She loved how he pushed her. She loved the way he made her face herself. She loved that he demanded her trust, and never betrayed it, or her.

Her therapist had expressed some hesitation about Romily embarking on a relationship like this, that pushed so many boundaries that must certainly bring up things she'd prefer to forget. That seemed a little too close to things that had happened to her that didn't end quite so orgasmically.

But to Romily, there was no comparison.

Joseph had been a monster. There was no other way to put it.

Being with Zachary was like an exorcism. Somehow, she'd never felt more like herself. She didn't wear masks. He didn't pretend to be something he wasn't. He was the most forthright person she'd ever met.

And he was so beautiful he made her heart hurt inside her chest.

She lifted her face to his and she smoothed her hand over the harsh planes of his face. She let his beard gently abrade her palms.

"I hope this is okay to say," she said quietly. Softly. "But Zachary. I'm so in love with you."

She watched, not sure if she was holding her breath or merely frozen still, as his blue eyes blazed.

And then that mouth of his, so stern when he wanted it to be and so wicked when he used it against her in so many delectable ways, curved.

"That's the best news I've heard in years," he told her, his hand a fist in her hair. "And not a moment too soon, baby. I'm pretty sure I've been in love with you since the day we met."

He didn't go off into a flowery speech, because he didn't need to dress things up. He didn't promise her the sun and the moon and the stars because he preferred to deliver them in bed, and often. He didn't just mirror back the things she said to him, so it seemed like they were in tune—she wouldn't fall for that again.

She'd never known Zachary to say anything unless he meant it.



Which meant that if he said he loved her, he really did.

Romily felt as if he'd made her brand-new. Shiny and bright and happy.

Then he leaned in and kissed her in his typically filthy, addictive way.

"I think we should celebrate," he told her then. "And I know how. I think it's time we go get your shit."

## Chapter Eleven

He carried her into the bathroom and set her down on one of the benches in the shower. He got the water to her preferred temperature and the steam billowing, then spent a good bit of time inspecting Romily's lovely body the way he always did, to make sure the games they played left only the marks he wished her to wear.

She sat back and watched him, her gaze still soft and warm. "I love you," she told him, as he knelt there before her. "I had no idea it was possible to love this much without it being dangerous."

He smiled, and nipped the inside of her wrist as he held her hand. "Little bird, it's always dangerous. What it's never going to be is damaging. Never."

And the gold in her eyes was so bright it made the sunshine pouring in the windows seem pale in comparison.

This was what he'd wanted, Zachary thought. This was what he'd been certain they could have. What he hadn't expected was how it felt like peace inside him.

Like after all this time, from his earliest memories through prison to the life he'd led since, he was finally home.

As safe with this woman as she was with him.

It felt like a fucking sacrament.

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Zachary was tempted to get distracted as he pulled her to her feet—Romily standing there so lush and beautiful, made of lean muscle and aware of her own power now, not to mention all his in every possible way now — but there was going to be time for that later.

A long, long time, if he had anything to say about it.

While she was getting ready, he made a quick call to Frederick. Just to get a few details straight in his head, and to discuss an action plan moving forward.

“Claiming that prize, are we?” his friend asked with a laugh. His voice was dry. “Who could possibly have foreseen this shocking turn of events.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Zachary suggested.

His old friend was still laughing as Zachary ended the call.

Then he and Romily got back in the car and headed out of the marina. This time they headed away from the Bay and deeper into the suburbs. They passed the gleaming white Claremont Hotel, sitting pretty on its hill. They went through Caldecott Tunnel, out of the East Bay and into the broader Bay Area, and on until Walnut Creek.

It was quiet in the car. Peaceful. Romily had her hand on his leg. He returned the favor when he could take his hand off the wheel in all of the typically aggressive traffic. But as they drove toward Romily’s past, he found himself thinking about his.

Not in specifics this time. But there was a part of Zachary that would always miss the

redwoods that had surrounded him in his youth. All that eucalyptus and moss. But that wasn't something that he could return to. Because what he really missed were those snatches of his childhood where he'd been, if not precisely innocent, still young enough to imagine that things could get better on their own.

He knew better now. He knew that any kind of change took work. Sometimes a whole lot of suffering, but he understood that the only way out of pain was through. He was more than happy to put the work in to make that happen.

Today included. He followed Romily's directions as she led him deep into one of those Contra Costa County towns that he'd never paid much attention to. This far out of San Francisco proper, to his way of thinking, a person might as well commit and move into the Central Valley.

But then, he supposed he couldn't help but judge the kind of person who would buy a house in a development where everything looked beige and boring and the same. Zachary thought that was the kind of life choice that made statements about the sort of life a person expected to have.

Then again, life on the waterfront wasn't for everyone. Oakland was a troubled city, but it was his now. He wouldn't trade a single bit of spray paint on his gym doors for what looked to him like anesthesia delivered in the form of houses.

Or even the nostalgic deep green of Larkspur.

"Are you okay?" he asked Romily as they navigated their way through a neighborhood that felt like a maze to him.

She'd been gazing out the window, but when she turned to look at him, she didn't look frightened at all. If anything, she looked resolved.

“I am more than okay.” Her voice had that same resolve. “If anything, I just... can’t believe that this is finally happening. That I’m in any kind of situation to come back here or try to reclaim anything. Part of me thought that I would be running and hiding for the rest of my life.” She smiled at him. “And to be clear, I was perfectly okay with that. Didn’t really want to lay eyes on him ever again.”

“You don’t have to now,” Zachary told her. He didn’t know what expression was on his face, only that her eyes went wide. “I’m more than happy to have a little talk with your man myself.”

“He’s not my man. Thank God.”

When Romily reached over to put her hand on his leg, Zachary covered it with his.

They made it to the house in question and it was indistinguishable from all the other houses on the same street. He figured that was on purpose. What a perfect way to hide in plain sight. An asshole like Romily’s ex could look like everyone else on the outside so no one would question what he was doing indoors.

He wondered how many other houses on the street were storing the same kind of secrets behind their matching interiors. It hadn’t been any different where he’d grown up. The houses might not have matched and they’d been tucked away prettily in all the redwoods, but the misery people lived with in private while pretending they were happy in public was no doubt the same.

Zachary couldn’t do it. He liked the brash honesty of a place where shit was always on blast and usually in the streets. He liked the clarity of knowing exactly where he stood.

He couldn’t go back.

This was the last stop on the nostalgia tour, and then he and Romily were never looking back again. It was going to be their bright fucking future all the way.

They parked in the driveway and walked up to the front door. Romily had explained that her douchebag ex was one of those cyclists—meaning of course, the kind of man who pranced around in Lycra and tap shoes. Zachary didn't feel he really needed to express his sentiments on that in words when the single look he'd sent her way made his feelings on that shit clear.

He already knew that there was a high probability that Joseph wouldn't be home when they get here. But he could admit that there was a not-insignificant part of him that really, really wished that the man who'd treated Romily so badly was around. Zachary would have loved to teach him a few lessons.

After Romily rang the doorbell a few times, she looked up at him and shrugged. "He's not the kind of guy who ignores a doorbell. There's no way he's here."

"Let's do it," Zachary said. And stood at the door as she reached down behind one of the shrubs flanking the front step and dug around until she came back up with the key.

"He likes his routines," she told him. "He doesn't like change."

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The only time Zachary saw her pause was when she opened up the door and took what sounded like a steadying sort of breath before she stepped over the threshold. He settled his hand at the nape of her neck and that seemed to help. She smiled up at him. Then she led the way inside.

Romily walked through the house, looking around as she went. Her frown grew more and more pronounced as she led him up the narrow stairs to the second floor and then into the bedroom. Once there, she turned in a circle. She was shaking her head as she walked to the closet—and actually slammed it shut again when she opened it.

“This is so creepy,” she managed to say, looking... not panicked, exactly. Just a little freaked. “I left over a year ago. And he hasn’t changed a thing. Not one thing, Zachary.”

So the dude was a psycho as well as a creep and a coward, who liked to beat up women. Noted.

“We can psychoanalyze him later,” Zachary told her gruffly. “Let’s get what you need to get out of here.”

The next hour, that was what they did. They loaded everything up, everything and anything that she thought was worth keeping, and they packed it away in his car.

And Zachary was kind of enjoying the idea of the loser coming back home from his day or performatively blocking traffic in spandex and discovering that Romily had come and gone. Seemed kind of fitting.

But they weren't that lucky.

They had just locked up the house and returned the key to its place when Romily stiffened, then nodded over her shoulder.

Zachary turned, immediately on high alert. He watched the guy who came cycling in hot, and then threw himself off his obviously fancy bike. He let the bike itself fall into the grass, which, given the small sound that Romily made, was unusual.

But Zachary was assessing the other man, looking for hidden weapons—because otherwise, the dude was stringy and laughable. Zachary could break him in half without even exerting himself.

The conversation would change if Joseph was carrying, but as far as Zachary could tell—and this particular skill was one he took seriously and was good at because he had to be—he wasn't. There was too much spandex.

Zachary doubted very much that the man had lifted anything heavier than his ego in his life.

"I knew you'd come crawling back," Joseph said, his gaze fixed on Romily like Zachary wasn't even there.

That was fine with Zachary. He had time to notice the important things. Like the fact that Joseph was not only scrawny, but short. Or short compared to him, anyway.

And even more important, Romily did not cower. She looked confused for a moment, and then she stared at Joseph as if she barely recognized him.

Zachary figured it was probably the opposite. He could see the way that Joseph was noting the differences in Romily. All that smooth, lean muscle she'd built, for one



thing. Her shoulders weren't stooped and hunched anymore. She wasn't skinny and frail.

Not one part of her looked haunted.

"I see all your running and hiding hasn't agreed with you much," Joseph continued in that same too-intimate, half-sneering way that made Zachary want to beat the man with his own bike. "But don't worry, I'll make sure you work on getting that weight back down. A trim body is important, Romily. How many times have I told you that?"

"I've moved all my things out," Romily told him in an admirably neutral tone. "And I'm filing for divorce."

"You and I both know that's never going to happen," Joseph said, shaking his head like he pitied Romily. "I won't allow it."

"Hey. Buddy." Zachary shook his head, standing there on the step below Romily and still taller than her. "The days of anyone giving a shit what you allow or don't allow are long over."

But the guy didn't move his gaze from Romily. It was like he didn't hear Zachary. Like he didn't see the massive stranger standing at his front door, clearly capable of ripping him to pieces. It was almost impressive.

"What are you thinking, Romily?" Joseph asked softly. "Showing up at our house with this person?"

"The thing is, you're so much scarier in retrospect." Romily stared right back at Joseph, holding his gaze in a way that Zachary could tell the other man didn't like. "Because standing here right now, looking at you again, I don't have the slightest

idea why I ever found you anything but sad.”

Joseph didn't like that. He took a quick step or two in their direction, but Zachary moved even more fully in front of Romily. Then he folded his arms, and watched as Mr. White Bread got a good look at all his tattoos and all the muscles they adorned.

“This isn't going to go the way you think it is,” Zachary told him, matter-of-factly. “I get that you're the kind of douchebag who gets off on beating up a woman whose smaller and weaker than you. Two things about that. One, Romily is neither small nor weak. She could kick your ass right now if she felt like it, and honestly? I'd cheer her on. But two, and more imminently threatening to you, is me.”

“You're threatening me?” Joseph looked at Zachary then, as if he'd won something. “Fascinating. You look like a criminal. I don't think anyone in this neighborhood wants criminals wandering around. All I have to do is make one call you'll be hauled away.” He looked back at Romily. “And then we can see how tough you are, my darling wife.”

“Yeah,” Romily said with a laugh as Zachary gathered himself, prepared to handle this. “None of that is going to happen.”

And then, to Zachary's astonishment, as Joseph took another step closer to them Romily went and placed her body in between the two men.

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When Zachary tried to move forward, she held him back. Or rather, she held out her arm and he didn't push right past it.

"He's not worth it," she told Zachary, though her gold gaze was fixed on Joseph. "Let him call whoever he wants. But don't lay finger on him. Can't you see? That's what he wants. He's a coward."

"That I can see with my own eyes, baby," Zachary said.

It was hard to say which part of that Joseph hated more. The coward or the baby.

"You've forgotten your manners, Romily," he said in that creepy, condescending voice of his.

Once again, Zachary wanted to take him apart. And also, again, Romily held up her arm. This time, she took a small step toward Joseph.

Zachary knew he wasn't the only one who felt the shift in the air.

Joseph fell back a step. Romily stood taller. Zachary didn't have to have been present for this marriage to understand what was happening here. She wasn't cringing.

And her douchebag ex didn't know what to do with that.

"Such tough guy in private, aren't you, Joseph?" Romily was saying. "Such a big man when you've tricked a woman into falling for you so you can switch it up when she finally trusts you. What a power trip. But face to face with a real man, the only

thing you can think to do is tuck your tail between your legs and call the cops. Pathetic.”

It was clear to Zachary that Joseph had never heard her say anything like this before. The look on the other man’s face was priceless. His mouth actually fell open.

He was tempted to take a picture.

“Besides,” Romily continued. “If anyone’s going to swing on you, Joseph, it’s going to be me. I think we both know I owe you a few.” She laughed when the other man actually blinked and stepped back yet again. “What a sad little coward you are. I never want to see you again.”

She started toward the car and Zachary went with her, aware that Romily was still making sure that her body was between Zachary and Joseph.

Joseph bared his teeth, but he didn’t follow after them. “This isn’t the end. I don’t know why you think you can just come here and make demands.”

The best part now, Zachary thought, was that the guy clearly hadn’t realized that they’d gone inside the house and taken what was Romily’s. That would be a little gift for him later.

He loved that for Joseph, really he did.

“You’ll be served papers on Monday,” Zachary told him. “Respond or don’t respond. It doesn’t make a difference. But I’ll tell you this. If I were you, I’d think long and hard about how you want this to go. Because sooner or later, the divorce is going to happen. If I were you, I’d make sure that it was easy.”

Joseph bared his teeth. “Are you threatening me again?”

“I don’t have to make threats, asshole,” Zachary told him. “All you need to do is remember that I’m your worst nightmare. I’ve already been to prison. More than happy to go back. There’s nothing about you that scares me or ever could. And now I know where you live.”

“That sounds like a threat!” Joseph threw at him.

“Honestly,” Zachary said, grinning in a way that made the other man shrink back, “I kind of hope you do make it hard. I really do.”

Then he made sure that Romily was safely in the car, door locked. Only then did he round the hood, climb in and drive her out of the past at last—and straight on into their future.

## Chapter Twelve

Joseph was not a bright guy, as Romily wished she’d understood from the start. He did not make it easy. Not at first.

They ended up in court. But Zachary’s friend Frederick, who seemed to affect a courtroom the way Zachary affected a bedroom, handled everything. Eighteen months after Zachary and Romily faced Joseph on the front step of that cursed little house in Walnut Creek, the divorce was final and Romily was free.

She stood in the window of their apartment, looking down at the marina where she’d lived for those six months before she’d actually met Zachary. That was hard to imagine now.

As far as she was concerned, her life had begun that foggy night she’d met her Viking at last.

She could hear music thumping from the gym downstairs, where she still worked. She'd taken on more of the business side of things over time, freeing Zachary up to do more of the private coaching that he liked. Zachary had started to refer to it as the gym.

He did that with everything. Like all of this was theirs.

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Their life. Their beautiful, beautiful life, filled with more wonder and joy than she ever could have imagined.

If anything, the games they played had only gotten hotter. And the longer they were together, the more that power exchange he talked about on the very first night consumed them.

Though that wasn't the right way to put it, Romily thought. It wasn't that it consumed them. It was just... who they were.

Radical trust. Radical honesty.

It wasn't always easy, but it was so beautiful, and it was theirs.

He had turned her into a gym rat like him. She was barely recognizable from the haunted, terrified creature who had scurried around this neighborhood when she'd first moved here. Now she had muscles everywhere. She could lift well over her body weight, do actual pull ups, and was training for a half-marathon. She'd learned how to box, too, just in case any unpleasant memories slithered into view one of these days.

She could more than take care of herself, and that made her feel safe.

But she also didn't have to take care of herself, because Zachary did that—and that made her feel even safer.

She took care of him in return, fully aware of what an honor it was that she was the

only one he let close enough to do that.

Her marriage had been so twisted and suffocating that it had never occurred to her to imagine that she could have a life like this. Zachary expected her to be his partner in all things. The gym. His life. His friends. Nothing was hidden. Everything was open. He'd insisted that she study this lifestyle that they'd fallen into, but most people plotted out more deliberately.

The way he should have done, she knew now. It made her smile, standing there, to think back to those early days. He'd been a Viking god to her, and it never would have crossed her mind if he was anything but in total control of himself.

And now she knew that he'd fallen as hard as foolishly she had.

It made her feel giddy.

But not as giddy as she felt when the door opened and he walked in.

And they both smiled as if they hadn't seen each other in years.

"I am, at last, a single woman," she told him. When his dark brow rose, she smiled wider, even as that electricity coiled side of her. "Legally speaking, of course."

"Of course," Zachary agreed.

He moved over to her and looped a hand around the nape of her neck, pulling her close so he could kiss her. Just as filthy as ever.

She was wet instantly. She was shivering immediately.

And she gasped as if it was the first time when he whirled her around and bent her



over the narrow bench in front of the window that was there for precisely this purpose.

His hands were on her hips, then he tugging the flirty little skirt she wore out of his way.

She didn't know when she'd stopped wearing pants outside the gym. She only knew that he approved of her wearing skirts, because it was easier to get his hands on her. He liked her unencumbered, without panties as well, so he could fuck her pretty much where and when he wanted.

Which he did. All the time.

Zachary was deep inside her with one hard thrust and she let her head fall forward, gripping the bench with her fingers. Romily wanted to come, desperately. But he was silent. She knew what that meant.

"We'll get your tattoo tomorrow," he said as he fucked her, deep and hard and right on the verge of uncomfortable, just the way she liked it.

As he set that relentless rhythm of his, he slapped her ass with one hard palm. Then the other side. He wasn't gentle.

Because he knew. He knew exactly what spanking her while he was fucking her did to her. He knew exactly how much she loved it. How that stinging pain swirled around and seemed to pierce her clit.

Where she was already pierced. They had picked out the rings in her nipples and the jewel in her clitoral hood together. And it had all taken some time to heal, so she'd gotten even more skilled at the kind of face fucking he liked most.

She remembered that very first night and how he'd watched her watch him fuck the blonde so intensely, with his cock so far down her throat.

Romily still took pleasure in recreating that scene—and making it better for him.

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If anything, the longer they stay together, the more intense it all got.

“Please,” she was panting. “Please, Zachary. Please.”

“This is the real end,” he told her as he slammed himself into her. “The final moment. He’s gone, baby. Everything that happens now is only ours.”

Romily had to breathe so hard to keep from coming that it sounded like a sob, and his cock kept making it this close to impossible.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she managed to pant out, bewildered. “Who’s gone?”

Zachary’s laugh was dark and deep. It seemed to wind all around her like her favorite lash, making her clit throb.

She was a scant second away from disappointing him?—

“Come,” he told her, and she exploded.

And still he kept fucking her in that same hard, deep rhythm, sending her screaming through one orgasm and then building right back up toward another one.

All the while, he could spank her, so it was no time at all before she was begging him once again—only for him to deny her.

He pulled out and Romily thought that she might actually cry.

Zachary pulled her up from the bench, then lifted her into the air and held her there, like he was remembering their first night too.

And then, holding her gaze with all of that intense blue, he lowered her down onto his cock once more, and worked her there.

Like his own fuck toy, once again.

Romily knew that she was a thousand things to him, but these moments where he used her to slake his own lust made her glow, from the inside out.

He moved across the room, his cock still deep inside of her, and flattened her up against the wall. Then he held her up with the pressure of his body and got his hand around her neck.

“Right here,” he whispered. “Tomorrow.”

His cock was still pounding into her. His other hand gripped her ass, and hard. She had to fight and fight to keep from coming.

“Tomorrow,” she agreed.

They had designed the tattoo together. It would be her only one. An intricate collar around her neck, marking her as his forever.

She couldn't wait.

Romily tilted her head back so she could look at him. Directly in the eye.

“Zachary,” she whispered. “I love you so much. I can't wait for everyone to know that I'm yours with a single glance.”

“Sneaky,” he said reprovably, but he bit her lip, gently. “Very sneaky, little bird.”

Because his thrusts were getting wilder. Deeper. He was reaching his limit.

“I love you,” she said again, and kissed him.

“Come, Romily,” he gritted out, against her mouth. “Come for me.”

And she did. Over and over again, she shattered around his beautiful cock as he flooded her, deep inside.

The way she intended to do—with his collar inked in deep around her neck and her ass likely red from his hand—at his command, forever.