



Bared: A Dark Romance

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Young Adult

Description: He told me he would demand obedience. He took much more than that.

When I agreed to work for him I thought I knew what I was getting myself into, but I was wrong. I knew he would be stern. I knew he would be demanding. What I didn't expect was to find myself over his knee for a painful, humiliating spanking the very first time I displeased him.

But that was just the beginning. As he strips me bare and uses me as roughly and shamefully as he pleases, my body's response to his firm-handed dominance is undeniable. I'm going to take everything he gives me, and in my heart I know it won't be long until I'm begging for more.

Publisher's Note: Bared includes spankings and sexual scenes. If such material offends you, please don't buy this book.

Total Pages (Source): 44

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Chapter One

Tessa

I had already walked by the address twice. It was a lovely house with its crisp white paint, black shutters, and a matching black roof. The walkway leading up to the door had little green bushes with pink and white flowers.

Manicured.

Yes, that would be the word I'd use to describe it. It was a far cry from any house I ever lived or grew up in. Each house that lined the perfectly groomed sidewalk had the same charm, and if I wasn't nervous before, I certainly was now. I was now in the rich part of San Francisco. The part of the city that girls like me didn't visit.

I kept trying to chant to myself that it was just an interview. Just an interview. I'd had plenty of interviews before, but this time was different. This time, it wasn't for some shitty waitress job or tending bar in some dive. This one was different. So, so very different.

I still couldn't believe I had found the courage to apply. It wasn't like me to be so bold, adventurous, and yet... the minute I read the words, I knew I wanted it more than anything I had ever wanted before.

Wanted: Executive Assistant.

Looking for a live-in assistant, cook, and housekeeper to provide services to an

author during the writing of his novel. Job will require residing in a secluded mountain cabin for a minimum of six months, and then back in the city after that. The ideal candidate will provide personal assistance in the publishing process, housekeeping, meal preparation, the overall running of the house, helping the author in proofreading, and other duties.

Please click on the link below and complete application. A nondisclosure agreement will need to be signed due to the employer working in the public eye.

The fact that the job required you to live on location—win. The eviction notice sitting on a crappy particleboard table in my small studio weekly made it quite clear to me that I needed a solution to my situation and quick. I had less than twenty dollars to my name, a laptop that sometimes worked, and a suitcase of cheap clothes. This pathetic existence had to come to an end one way or the other. All my life I had moved from one dirty motel to the next with my deadbeat mother who would rather drink or snort our dinner money than worry about her annoying daughter whom she'd only kept around so she could collect more welfare and extra food stamps.

Now, actually being an executive assistant? That was a different story. I had never even held any type of professional job before and considered myself quite uncomfortable around corporate types in general. Money, and all those who had it, made me uncomfortable. But... well, I had to do something. So deciding to throw all caution to the wind, I clicked on the link. I answered all the basic questions that were on any standard application, and I gave a silent prayer that maybe luck could work in my favor for a change. But there were some questions that definitely brought it home that I was applying for a job that was completely out of the ordinary for me.

Have you ever been a personal assistant before? No.

Are you prepared to relocate to a remote cabin? Yes.

Are you prepared to have little to no interaction with anyone but the employer? Yes.

Do you read novels often? No.

Trying to not overthink why I was being asked if I read or not, and wondering if it was a deal breaker if I wasn't literary, I simply answered all the questions as honestly as I could and hit send. It was done, and there was no looking back. One day turned to two, but I finally got an email that asked for an interview.

I had stared at those words in disbelief. Had I made it to stage two? Was I actually being considered for the position? I wanted this. I wanted this more than anything.

So, as I rode the city bus to the address provided, I chanted positive words of affirmation over and over. A teacher once had told me to do so when the dark shadows came into my life. Affirmations. I still remember how I had never heard of the word, and the idea seemed ridiculous, but I did it regardless. It helped, and I'd been doing it ever since. But this time it did little to calm my raging nerves.

I had given myself plenty of time, not sure how long the bus would take and if I would even be able to find the address. So, when I did, and still had a half hour to stall, I just walked around the neighborhood. It was fun pretending that I lived in it, walking my dog, or having a casual stroll in the evening enjoying the fresh air.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Glancing down at my watch for the hundredth time, I decided that arriving fifteen minutes early would be all right. I didn't want to come off as too desperate, but I wanted whoever was interviewing me to know that I was serious and reliable. Unfortunately, my resume didn't look that way since I'd worked one crap job after another, usually quitting because the asshole of a manager would make a move on me or the pay was so awful that it wouldn't even cover my bus fare. Taking a deep breath, I somehow drummed up the courage to walk up the stairs leading to the door. I pressed my finger on the doorbell and had a last-minute wish that I had painted my nails a delicate pink or something.

I didn't have to wait long before the door opened and a tall man with piercing dark eyes gazed down upon me. He was dressed casually in jeans and a white button-down shirt. His sleeves were rolled up, giving him a relaxed feel, yet his entire demeanor gave off an aura of authority. To only say the man was handsome would be an understatement. Mouthwatering, gorgeous, a gut-punching, breath-captivating sexy would be a better way to describe him.

"Yes?" he asked, tilting his head ever so slightly as he examined me from head to toe.

I shifted uncomfortably before I said, "I'm Tessa Stanton. I applied for your position." When he didn't say anything but instead continued to stare at me, I added, "I have an interview at three." I swallowed hard and attempted to look directly into his eyes. But when I saw the intensity in the rich brown color, I awkwardly looked toward the ground, feeling a sense of defeat. I was no match for the power he exuded. "I'm sorry I'm early."

He opened the door wider and moved to the side. "Come on in. My name is Price

Anderson, and I'm the one hiring for the position." He gave a slight smile, but not enough to come across as particularly friendly. He had a thick English accent that only added to his appeal for some unknown reason. The way he said each word sounded aristocratic, yet extremely masculine at the same time. "I like seeing my potentials arrive on time. Starting off on a good foot."

As I walked in, he placed his palm on my lower back and applied some pressure as he led me to a room toward the right. I wasn't used to a man touching me so freely unless he had something else in mind, but I didn't get that feeling from Mr. Anderson. If anything, the touch seemed like the courteous thing to do.

"You'll be meeting with me in here for the interview."

When I entered the room, it was hard not to feel instantly at ease. The room looked like it came right out of a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. The colors of light blue and classic gray blended perfectly. A large blue couch with patterned throw pillows expertly placed mastered the room. Armchairs sat across from the couch with cherry wood end tables on each side. Lamps with lovely shades stood nearby casting a warm glow on the room even though the sunlight still shone through the large windows with sheer lace curtains adorning them.

I wore black ballerina slipper shoes—scuffed and faded—and they made a light pitter-patter on the wood-plank floor as I was gently guided into the room. I tried to control all the nerves that wanted to release from my body in a big whoosh. I had never been so anxious before, and I only prayed that he wouldn't notice just how jittery I felt.

Mr. Anderson motioned to the couch with a brisk gesture of his hand. "Please have a seat, Miss Stanton. Let's begin the interview."

Chapter Two

Tessa

When I didn't move immediately, he continued to guide me to the couch with the warmth of his palm still against the small of my back. When he removed his hand to take a seat in the armchair directly across from where I was to sit, I felt a sense of loss. I hadn't even realized that his touch had given me a warm feeling of security until it was removed.

I sat down, held my shoulders back, positioned my feet together, and placed my hands on my lap. I wanted to appear distinguished and mature even though I felt anything but. The large cushions of the couch seemed to dwarf me in size, and the very tall and large man before me only added to that feeling. I struggled not to look around and fully examine all the little knickknacks that were scattered about. From the angle where I sat, I could see a fireplace with an ornate mantel and large mirror that hung above it. Classic would be a perfect word for this room. Every single item seemed to be in its assigned place without one thing being out of order.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Tessa Stanton,” Price began, looking down at the clipboard he had taken off the table nearby. He looked up and stared at me as if studying every single move I made. I tried to not pay attention to the way he watched me, or to how little butterflies attacked my stomach with the way he said my name—pronouncing it in a way that made it sound beautiful and elegant, unlike any way I’d ever heard before.

“Yes. My mother named me after a rich girl she went to school with. She decided that Tessa would be a good name to give me so I would one day be rich or something—like her classmate.” My mother would have also liked the way he said my name, but why I was giving him this useless information, I had no idea. I knew I needed to calm down and not hog the conversation, or I was going to blow this interview.

“All right, Tessa. It says on your application that you have never been a personal assistant before. Is that true?” He watched me intently, as if wanting to see how I delivered my answer rather than simply to hear it.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then why did you apply to be one?” he asked. His deep, husky voice rolled off his tongue as smooth as butter.

“I...” I glanced at my feet, back at him, and then decided I had to be honest. “I don’t know. When I saw the ad, there was something about it that just stood out. It interested me.”

“But you have never worked in this field at all? What about housekeeping?” he

asked, his eyes narrowing.

“No, sir. I’ve only been a waitress or a bartender. I was a maid once for a motel but was being paid under the table, and it was for less than a week, so I didn’t put it on the application.”

“Do you have any higher education?” he asked, the intensity of his stare making my skin burn.

“No, sir. I have no education to mention at all. That would have required my mother to actually care or be engaged in my life. I was pretty much on my own growing up. I wouldn’t call my mother a parent, but more the other way around.” I let out a defeated breath. I was giving away too much of my dramatic past. No employer wanted drama, and I was handing it to him on a silver platter. Shit. I needed to shut up.

“So where do you live now? Are you currently employed?” he asked.

“I’m not employed right now. The last job I had was at a café, and it went out of business. I currently live in... the city.” I didn’t want to continue on. He didn’t know, nor would he care, that I barely had enough money to get back to my shitty hole and have dinner for the night.

“Family in town?”

“Not unless you count my druggy mother. I’m sure she’s somewhere out there. But I haven’t seen her in over five years. So your guess is as good as mine.” And there I go again. Completely ruining this interview with my big mouth. I was a complete disaster and by the heat radiating from my face, I knew I had to be several shades of red as I did so.

“Did you read the part about having to be a live-in? Living in a remote cabin?” he asked, still staring at me with those dark eyes of his.

I nodded. “I think that was the part of the ad that interested me the most.” I struggled to inhale a steady breath, and stilled my fidgeting hands. “I’ve never been to the mountains before. Or a cabin.”

“Do you know who I am?”

I shook my head, confused by his question and looked down at the floor again where I got some feeling of reprieve from the penetrating energy in the room. “I don’t understand. Should I?”

Price sat back, clapped his hands together, and interlaced his fingers. “Very well then, let me make it perfectly clear what I am looking for.” He waited for me to look up and meet his eyes. “I’ve been writing psychological thrillers and horror novels for over two decades. I work under strict deadlines and have an aggressive production schedule for my releases. To hit these deadlines, I like to go to my cabin in the Sierra Mountains. I like to be away from San Francisco, the distractions, and breathe the mountain air. My writing consumes me, which means that unless I want to live in absolute squalor and living off no nutrients whatsoever, I need someone to handle providing the meals, making sure I actually eat them, and keeping the house from becoming uninhabitable. I also need someone to read my writing as I go to make sure I haven’t gone off track and to look for glaring mistakes. I am a taskmaster. I have extremely high standards and expect things done my way. My rules are my rules, and they aren’t up for negotiations. I have very little patience for just about anything.” He stopped and released a deep breath as he briefly closed his eyes before continuing. “Without going too much into the details about what I write, it often puts me in a dark mindset. Almost as if my words haunt me. So, I need someone to help keep all the shadows at bay, keep my life level, and to also know when to leave me alone.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

He looked at me as if expecting me to speak. Maybe he wanted me to say something, but I had no idea what that would be. His mention of dark shadows didn't deter me at all, and maybe he expected it would. But the sad thing was, his admittance of having the shadows was not all that different than the things I had to deal with in my life. I could have been the starring actress in his movie since I had played that part many a time.

“This job, Tessa, is not an ordinary job at all. You will not get to clock in and clock out. There are no breaks, no holiday pay, and no HR department to run to when you feel you're being mistreated. I'm an asshole. I'm a perfectionist. I like things my way, and only my way. If things are not done the way that I expect, I can be harsh and unforgiving. And I'm not going to be much company since I will be focused on my book and only my book. We will spend a lot of time at the cabin, and then when we leave there, we'll reassess your duties and what I will need from you.”

Swallowing against the lump in the back of my throat, I prayed my words wouldn't come out as a squeak. “I understand this job isn't going to be like a normal nine to five. I understand I have to live on location, Mr. Anderson. I completely understand what I'm getting myself into, and I want it.” All of his talk of rules and strict expectations did little to deter me. I had had some of the shittiest bosses anyone could imagine. No way could Mr. Anderson be any worse than them, and at least with this job, I didn't have to go home to a pile of bills and an eviction notice staring back at me.

He paused with skepticism washed all over his face. “So you have no experience in this type of work. Yet, you want this job simply because it's going to be in the mountains?”

“Right,” I said as I decided I better try to fight for this if I really wanted the job. Which I did. Otherwise, I was going to blow any opportunity I had. “I mean, not just because it’s in the mountains, but because it’s different from everything else I have ever done before. I understand that I don’t have any experience in this, but I can assure you that I’m a quick learner and a hard worker. I’m loyal, dedicated, and there isn’t anything I won’t do that is needed of me. I’m not a diva or high maintenance, and I know how to keep my head down and my mouth shut.” I took a deep breath, and paused to try to read him, which was completely impossible since he only stared at me with zero emotion. “I will give everything I have to making sure I provide all the duties you require.”

“I’m finding it hard to believe that you would want a job where you’re expected to pick up and move to a place out in the middle of nowhere. With a man you know nothing about other than the fact that I just told you that I’m a strict asshole. How do you know you would like it? Are you prepared for the fact that there is no one around? There will be no way to easily go into town, no real days off, and your only company will be a good book or Mother Nature since I’ll be locked away in my office writing for the majority of the time,” Price informed.

“Well, I don’t know that I’ll like it. But does anyone know if they will truly like a job when they interview for one? All I do know is that I’ve worked some lousy jobs in the past, and they barely kept me fed, let alone housed.” I ran my palms along the fabric of my skirt, trying my best not to fidget anymore, or put my fingernail in my mouth and start nibbling away, which was always a bad habit of mine. “I believe that I would enjoy being... being your assistant. I won’t lie and say the idea of picking up and moving doesn’t gives me butterflies in my stomach.” My face had to be bright red because the heat radiating from it had grown so powerful that my ears actually felt hot. “And I have never had housing provided before with any of my past work.” I glanced around with longing. “I also have never lived in a house before. It shames me to admit to that, but maybe it will help explain why everything about the ad appealed to me. If I got this job, I would have a chance to live a completely different life. A life

that has only been a fantasy for me. Working for an author and caring for a house... well, that sounds like heaven. It's something I have never had a chance to experience, and if I were given the opportunity to do this, I would not let you down. I assure you."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

There, I did it. I spilled my guts.

Price leaned forward, placed his elbows on his thighs, and stared directly into my eyes. “Is it the move to the cabin, the job, or me that gives you butterflies in your tummy?”

Oh, God. The way his thickly accented voice asked the question caused a pulsation between my legs. Arousal, need, and a hell of a lot of confusion attacked me as he intently waited for my response.

“I don’t have an answer to that.” I began to fidget with my fingers, no longer being able to control the impulse. “You intimidate me. The job scares me. But I know I can handle it.”

“You think you can handle me?” he asked with a slight smirk as he leaned back. “I told you. I’m an asshole.”

I nodded as I swallowed against the lump forming in the back of my throat. “Yes, sir. I can.”

He leaned forward again and narrowed his eyes. “I can pretty much guarantee that this job will be unlike any other job you have had before. I’m not promising you wine and roses. Quite the opposite.”

I suppose a normal person would have run out the door right then and there and never looked back. Maybe I should have. In all actuality, I should have been terrified that I would be alone in a cabin with a man I didn’t know.

But I wasn't.

"I can do this job, Mr. Anderson. If you hire me, you can one hundred percent focus on your book and nothing else. I will have everything you ask for covered." I said this not much louder than a whisper and wished I had sounded more confident. "When are you looking for someone to start?" I asked, with more confidence this time.

I knew, without a doubt, that I wanted this job more than anything. Maybe I'd lost my mind, but I didn't care. I didn't even know how much my pay would be, but if it meant I got to live in a cabin, and not have to live in the dark dank world of my current existence... I wanted it.

"Right away," Price answered. "I need to get to the cabin and get to work straightaway. I've been interviewing for days, and I'm not getting what I really need to be done, done."

I looked down at my feet before looking back at Price with a courage I had to force out. "Then hire me now. I can start immediately."

I held my breath and waited for an answer. Should I not have been so bold? Should I have asked more questions? I certainly had many more questions to ask. I didn't want to come off as overly eager but... I was. I not only needed a job and a place to live, but I was desperate to experience something new. I wanted a fresh start, and I felt that this job could be exactly what I needed to achieve it.

Price stood up and silently motioned for me to follow him to the front door. The thought that I would be dismissed and sent away like all the others he had interviewed sent a wave of panic through me, but at the same time, I knew I'd done the best that I could fighting for the chance.

"Are you sure you want this job, Tessa?" Mr. Anderson asked as we stood in front of

the door. “There’s no turning back once we’re up there. I won’t have time to take you back and do this entire interview process all over again. So if I hire you, you are stuck on that mountain whether you like it or not. At least until I write the words ‘The End.’”

I nodded as I tried to control my breathing. Could this be it? Would he decide right now if I got the job or not? “If you hire me, Mr. Anderson, I will have champagne and the best dinner of your life waiting as you type those words. I assure you that you won’t have to worry about me changing my mind at all.”

He paused and then gave another one of his half smiles. “Then consider yourself hired.”

Chapter Three

Price

“So tell me about this person you hired,” my editor said.

I sighed into the phone. “I’d rather not. No one I hire is going to be good enough in your eyes unless I hire Joseph.”

“Joseph is good. He helped you a lot with your last book, and—”

“Joseph is a prick. He spent half of his time taking pictures of me working and posting my sleep-deprived ass all over social media in return for likes or follows or whatever the fuck it is he wanted.”

“He knows this business, Price. He also knows what the readers want and—”

“I already hired someone, Brett,” I interrupted again. “She’s heading up with me to

the cabin today, and that's final." I pulled out sweaters and flannels from my closet as I spoke and threw them onto the bed. I had asked Tessa to meet me here at noon and I was quickly running out of time.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Yeah, Tessa Stanton. You sent me her resume, if you can even call it that. I don’t see why you hired her unless she’s a hot piece of ass that you simply want to fuck.”

I couldn’t help but smile at my crass editor’s comment. Yes, she was a hot piece of ass, and definitely fuckable, but I had no intention of doing so nor was that why I hired her. I had a weakness for big blue eyes and long blonde hair, which Tessa had, but it stopped there. My head wasn’t in the game for anything else. “She’s cute. She’s genuine and not pretentious like that Joseph fuck. I see honesty in her eyes, and she sure as hell won’t get offended when I ask her to make me a sandwich or get me a cup of coffee. She really seemed to want the job. She was hungry for it.”

In fact, I got the impression the poor girl was hungry period. It was clear she had a rough go at life so far, and for some reason it all fascinated me. Her drive to improve her situation was the reason I spontaneously hired her. That and the fact that I couldn’t possibly do another interview. I was sick of it and ready to get to my book.

“I’m sure everyone who interviewed wanted the job. Who wouldn’t?”

“Yeah, well, she seemed to want it for different reasons. She was honest... almost to a fault. All the other candidates made me want to stab my eyeballs out thinking of spending six months alone with them. Either that, or they only wanted this job to use me for their own career. Tessa seemed different. I could actually stand her, which couldn’t be said for the others.”

“And you are sure you want to bring her up to the cabin?” Brett asked. “You haven’t brought anyone up there since...”

“Molly,” I finished the sentence for him. “You can say her name, you know. It’s not some dirty word, or some deep hidden secret. And yes, I am aware that I haven’t brought anyone up there since Molly, but again, I’m not bringing Tessa up there for the same reasons. She’s my assistant and nothing more.”

I didn’t have time for women and relationships in my life. A lonely existence, but my life regardless. I had tried to bring a woman up to the cabin with me as I wrote. Thinking she could be my muse and it would help inspire me to make my writing a little more sexy and appealing to the female reader, but it had been an epic fail. Poor Molly had been ignored, fucked on occasion, then ignored some more. After that failed attempt at normalcy, I decided that I needed an assistant, not a fuck buddy.

“Yeah, tell me that in a month when you are buried balls deep in her tight ass.” Brett chuckled. “Whatever. Just get that book done. No more extensions are allowed or you have to pay back that advance. So get busy and don’t get pulled into all that pussy bullshit.”

“Great talk,” I mumbled as I continued to pack. “I’ll text you when we arrive, and I’ll stay in touch.”

“Don’t let the bears eat you. And I need words, Price. Words!”

* * *

Tessa

My life had trained me for this moment. My mother and I had never stayed in one place long. Hopping from one motel to another, or even from one homeless shelter to another, I had learned to pack fast and not hold on to possessions that couldn’t be crammed into a backpack at a moment’s notice. So, when Price wanted to leave right away for the mountains, it wasn’t hard for me to make that happen. I was packed,

standing back on his doorstep with a suitcase and my trusty backpack in hand, and ready to go before he was.

As we began the journey to his isolated house, I wondered if the entire trip would be in silence. It was awkward, and I couldn't help but wonder how I would be able to live with this man for months alone when we couldn't even have a conversation. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but I couldn't drum up the courage to do so. Maybe he liked the silence. Maybe he wouldn't want me talking to him at all while we were there. He did say his book would be his focus, and it was very likely he was plotting it out as we drove. I certainly didn't want to upset him by breaking his concentration, so I just remained quiet.

Price wore a red flannel long-sleeve shirt, jeans, and brown boots, giving off a completely different aura than the more businessman attire he wore during the interview. He seemed more casual and warm on the outside—far less stuffy and uptight than he'd been when I first met him, yet he still sat straight and acted cold and distant. I had packed every item of clothing I had, and the warmest jacket I owned really wasn't cut out for snow or mountain temperatures. I didn't own heavy duty boots either, but figured that I would just borrow a coat from Price if I had to go out in the snow for some reason. Though it did sound like we would be spending most of our time indoors.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“The house has been stocked, and firewood has been delivered already. We have enough food to last us about a month or so. After that, we’ll need to drive into town to get supplies,” Mr. Anderson finally said out of nowhere. It was the first sound slicing the silence, and I nearly jolted out of my seat when he said the words.

“All right,” I said softly, not sure if I should say more or ask some of the questions I still had. “I guess I should have asked this before, but is there electricity in the cabin? Are we going to be roughing it?”

“That’s a good question. There is power there provided by a generator. I will need it for my computer. You will need it for cooking and cleaning, but we won’t use it for much more than that. I prefer to heat the house with the fireplace and the gas stoves we’ll have in our bedrooms. I also prefer to use candlelight in the evenings. I need a break from the bright light of my computer all day, and it helps rest my mind.” He looked away from the road a moment to stare at me. “There is no television up there or any electronics. But the job will keep you pretty occupied.”

“I’m looking forward to this, Mr. Anderson,” I confessed. “It sounds like a nice break from the day-to-day madness we all endure in the city.”

“You can call me Price. We will be living together, so my first name is appropriate unless, of course, we are in a situation of reprimand and correction. In which case, I will expect you to show me the respect of calling me ‘sir.’”

I wasn’t exactly sure how to respond to his words. They came out so proper and formal, and I also didn’t think I would be in a situation where I would disappoint him. I was going to work my ass off to impress the man.

“I know I already asked you if you read novels, and you said no. What is the reason for that?”

I swallowed hard, uncomfortable with the question. I wasn't sure if I should answer him honestly or try to come up with some reason that didn't make me sound like an uneducated, white trash idiot.

“I'm not sure. I was brought up learning how to survive and hustle. Going to school was only a necessity so Child Services stayed away from my mother and me. I don't even think I owned a book, to be honest. Ever.”

“That's a shame,” Price said, though not in a way that made me feel judged. He was simply stating a fact.

“Yeah, my entire childhood was pretty much a shame.” My heart skipped as I said the last sentence, instantly regretting telling him too much. He was my employer, not my counselor. I needed to remember that my issues were not his, and the last thing he needed or wanted in his life was a big case of walking drama... which I was known to be at times. “But I can read, and I'm a fast learner. I hope you don't think I can't do the job.”

“If I thought you couldn't do the job,” he began, “I wouldn't have hired you. Part of the reason I hired you is that you were different than the arrogant literary types who were applying for this job. Everyone wanted to be Price Anderson's assistant. The fame aspect, I suppose. Not to mention how pretty and shiny it would look on their bullshit resumes. Not one of them really understood what I wanted in this job. I didn't want a cowriter. I didn't want an editor. I sure as hell didn't want a fan or groupie. I guess I liked that you had no idea who I was or what I even write.”

Price turned the corner and had to slam on the brakes as a deer darted out of the trees. His arm instinctively shot out in front of me in protection, holding me back against

the seat. The deer stopped in the middle of the road and just stared at us for several moments. I had never seen a live deer so close before.

“Sorry about that,” he said, turning to look at me with worry in his eyes. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “Just fine.” I kept staring at the deer. “She’s so pretty.”

“You’re going to see a lot of them up at the cabin. They come out in the yard almost every day.” Price honked his horn, scaring the deer back to the safety of the woods. “There’s a lot of wildlife up there. Deer, black bears, rattlesnakes, raccoons, an occasional mountain lion, and the pesky skunk. There’re also some beautiful birds, and if you’re really lucky, you might get to see a bald eagle.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“You’re making this place sound like paradise. I may never want to return to San Francisco,” I said.

“Part of this job is reading my work daily. I will want you to give your honest feedback as well as look for errors.”

“I’m not sure how good I will be at editing. I—”

“I’m not looking for an editor,” Price cut in. “I already have that. I’m looking for fresh eyes. And it doesn’t take a Masters in English Literature to spot an extra ‘the’ in the sentence, or notice that the hero in the story had a dog in chapter three, but in chapter eight the dog turned into a cat. Having your eyes will help me in the process. I prefer to fix it as I go rather than all at the end.”

“Well, then I can do that. It sounds different and exciting,” I answered honestly.

“This job is not going to be easy. You will have to learn my habits and what I like and don’t. I get up very early in the morning and start work. I like breakfast and coffee at my desk, as well as lunch. But I want to get in the habit of quitting at dinnertime and coming out of my office to eat dinner at the table with you. I will rely on you to make this happen, which won’t be easy. I tend to get lost in my words, and when I say five minutes, it very well could turn into five hours if you don’t help me stay on a schedule.”

“I can handle that.” And I really felt I could. I didn’t grow up with family dinners at a table, and the thought of doing so—even though we weren’t really a family—sounded really nice. Normal.

After driving on nothing but winding roads through dense forest, we came upon a really quaint mountain town. There was a single bar and restaurant called The Timber Lodge, a small market, a bait and tackle shop, a mechanic, a single pump gas station, and a few other retail shops. If you blinked, you would surely miss it.

“This is Pine Ridge. It’s the closest town to the cabin and where we’ll come to restock,” Price informed me as he slowed down and drove through it slowly. “The Timber Lodge serves great prime rib, so when we do come into town, we can stop there for a good meal.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I took it all in. It was like going on a vacation to a romantic and secluded getaway, though that was never the case in my life. Sitting next to an employer about to be a cook and cleaner for him was as good as my romance story would get.

“I plan to have us stay here through the fall and winter. Hopefully by late February, my book will be done and ready to hand off to the editor. We can head back to San Francisco then. Even though it snows a lot here, and there are times we will definitely be snowed in, getting down the mountain to this town is pretty doable for the most part,” Price added as he turned onto a dirt road off the main highway.

I held onto my seat as the Jeep began bouncing around on the rough terrain. “Do we have any neighbors?” I asked as my right shoulder banged against the car door.

“Not any within walking distance. I suppose you could walk into town, but that would take you several hours. So unless we can drive on this road, we’re pretty trapped up there.” He turned his head and gave me a smirk. “Don’t worry. We’ll have everything we need. There’s an emergency radio, plenty of supplies, and my editor knows if he doesn’t hear from me every morning, to check in. And if he can’t connect with me, then he knows to send authorities up the mountain to see if you and I are okay.”

“Do you write all your books up here?” I asked as I looked around and could see nothing but pine trees and Manzanita shrubbery. It really was in the middle of nowhere. The road we drove on was barely a road, and my brain already felt scrambled from all the bouncing around we were doing as Price maneuvered over the larger rocks and pits in the road.

“If I had my way, yes. Not always, but I do prefer it. I seem to do my best work on the mountain. Fresh air, no people, no distractions. I think you’re going to like it up here. It’s really picturesque and relaxing. I think it reminds me of when I was a kid. I always loved camping.”

“I’ve never been camping,” I admitted.

“Well, this cabin is far from camping. It’s even on the luxurious side, but the setting will give you that camping vibe.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

As we turned around the last bend, I could see the house come into full view. Price was right when he called it luxurious, because it clearly was. It was not the small two-bedroom cabin I had imagined. It was an extremely large two-story with a gigantic wraparound deck on both levels of the house. The exterior was made of logs, and the craftsmanship of the outside of the cabin was truly breathtaking. Large pine trees interspersed with aspens were scattered all around it, only adding to the beauty. Rocking chairs, hammocks, and a gas fire pit sat on the porch, making the outdoor living space seem like an area you would never want to leave.

“Wow,” was all I could say as Price pulled the vehicle up the driveway to the front door.

“It’s my favorite place in the world,” he said as he stopped the Jeep and hopped out. The minute he did, he put both of his hands on his lower back and stretched, inhaling deeply. “The alpine air alone is like an intoxicating drug.”

I hopped out of the Jeep and mimicked exactly what he did and instantly saw what he meant. Yes, the air, the environment... this truly could become an intoxicating drug for sure. Paradise. My new job was nothing less than pure paradise.

Chapter Four

Price

Watching her eyes dart around the room was like watching a child on Christmas morning. There was so much excitement present as well as awe. The way she looked around and took in every little detail was exactly how I used to do it when I first

arrived. I could see this place through her eyes and it was like walking back in time. She got it. She got the magic of this place like no one else ever had.

Spinning around to look at me after she soaked it all in, she smiled. "I can see why you come up here. I wouldn't want to leave if I were you either."

"Let's go inside. We can get our stuff once I show you around," I said as I placed my hand on her lower back and guided her up the porch steps.

Unlocking the door and stepping in, I was pleased to find that it still had the same smell I loved. Tessa also noticed the smell right away.

"Cinnamon. Wood. Warmth," she said under her breath. The words weren't meant for me to hear, but I did. She smelled what I did. And by the way she looked, I could tell it made her feel the same way.

There was still enough daylight left where I didn't need to light a candle yet or get the generator going, though we only had a short time before the sun would begin setting. Tessa's eyes went to the first focus of the room: the large floor-to-ceiling fireplace. It was made completely out of river rock and had a mantel fashioned out of an old fallen redwood tree found on the forest floor. She then turned to look at the second main focus of the room. The entire right side of the house was nothing but windows so that you could see out over a large valley. The house sat on a cliff that overlooked a large expanse of nothing but uninhabited wilderness. It was National Forestry land, and my view would forever be protected and untouched.

"Wow," she said again as she walked toward the windows. "I've never seen a view like this before. It's... I don't even have words to describe what it is."

"Wait until you sit here on the couch and look out on this when it's snowing. I can sit here and be lost for hours when it happens," I admitted.

I didn't usually gush about my one true love—my house—to anyone, but watching Tessa, I felt comfortable to do so. She seemed just as impressed with the cabin as I was. And not for the reasons someone like that asshole Joseph would be. Joseph would have noticed the expensive wood flooring, or the interior design, expensive leather furniture, and what artwork I had hanging. He would have paid attention to the money and the superficial parts of the house. Tessa saw the same things that made me love the house. The fact that she didn't even notice the Calcutta marble countertops in the kitchen that opened up to the main living room, or the top of the line stainless steel appliances, or the fact that she didn't gush over a single imported vase or ridiculously overpriced knickknack my interior designer insisted on said it all.

Tessa and I were going to get along perfectly.

“The kitchen is here,” I said as I guided us more to the right of the main room. “There is a large walk-in pantry that leads to a cellar downstairs. I like to keep all the perishables in the refrigerator down there because everything stays cold regardless if there is power or not. Like I said before, we have plenty of food to last us for a long time.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

She nodded as she took it all in. “I’ve never cooked in a kitchen so big before. It’s like it belongs to a chef.” Her eyes were wide, the blue really shining as the setting sun glimmered behind her through the picturesque windows that overlooked the cliff.

“My office is over here,” I continued, walking toward the double French doors with her close behind. I opened the doors to what was by far my most favorite place to be. The cozy room was mastered by another fireplace and a huge oak desk that had been in my family for generations. There was a smaller oak desk to the right of it near the window, which was where I planned on having Tessa work from. A huge rug that I had imported from Morocco covered most of the wood flooring and matched perfectly with the worn couch, loveseat, and reading chair that sat in front of the fireplace. I truly could spend all day in this room and never leave.

“I can see why you can create your books in here,” Tessa said as she walked over to the bookshelf that covered the left side of the room. “You have so many books.”

“A good author reads,” I said as I walked over to what would be her desk. “You’ll be working here. This will be your spot.”

She came and stood by me and looked out the window that offered a view of the forest. Suddenly, she squealed and pointed to the paned glass. “A deer. Oh, look, there are three of them!”

Her burst of excitement had me nearly jumping, and I couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. Smile... something I rarely did. I much preferred even-tempered and in control. Getting a better view, she moved her body closer to mine. Damn, she smelled good. Floral, exotic, sensual, and yet innocent.

Why the fuck was I smelling her?

“You’ll see a lot of them, but that is also why I don’t want you going into the woods without letting me know. There is a lot of wildlife out there, and I don’t want you to be alone. So you really do need to stay near the house.”

She nodded, which I appreciated. At least for now, it appeared she didn’t feel like she had to fight me or prove that she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. I had memories of having this exact same conversation with Molly. They had always ended with her pouting and then doing whatever she felt like doing regardless of what I said. Taking a deep and calming breath, and shaking the thoughts of her out of my head, I silently made a vow to make that the last time I would allow the ghost of that woman to haunt my thoughts any longer. Enough was enough. She had her own life with the banker man, and I sure as hell had my own life, which did not, and never would, involve her again. And Molly never smelled like Tessa...

Fuck! Why was I smelling her?

“Let me show you your room,” I said, needing to shake off the confusing thoughts of why Tessa all of a sudden seemed to be putting off some sort of scent that was like a magnet to my libido.

Trying my best not to look at her anymore—or smell her—I guided her up a large staircase with a landing that also had a large bookshelf full of books.

“I guess I better take up reading now,” Tessa said with a smile. “I have no excuse with all my choices. It’s like the movie *Beauty and the Beast*.”

I smirked. “You have no idea how true those words are. You haven’t seen me in writing mode. I’m more of a beast than I think you know, or are even prepared for.” And damn if she wasn’t a beauty.

Tessa didn't say anything but turned her head and just stared at me. Not in fear or even confusion. She just stopped and looked at me. Our eyes were connected, until it was I who broke the contact and continued up the stairs to her room. Opening the door, I walked in and instantly went to the stove in the corner of the room and began building a fire in it. The room was far too chilly for her to be comfortable, so I utilized the pile of wood already set up for her.

“Wow. This is my room?” she asked.

I looked over my shoulder for a brief moment and watched how she spun slowly around in a circle taking it all in. There was a king-size, four-poster bed draped with a heavy patchwork quilt. The artwork in the room was all watercolors I had found at a nearby town that had a local art fair. The sheer curtains were enough to block the bright sunrays of the morning but still allowed you to see the huge ponderosa trees outside.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Fair warning,” I said as I lit the fire, “there is a damn woodpecker that has made its home in that tree right outside your window. You may hear him in the early morning. Hell, you may hear him all the time.”

“Nature’s alarm clock,” she replied cheerily. It seemed nothing could wipe away the huge smile on her face.

I wasn’t one to surround myself with Pollyanna, Snow White type of people. Moody, dark, and just being an overall asshole did not attract me to that energy or the other way around. But there was something refreshing about Tessa and the way she looked at things. So pure and unsoiled. Though I got the feeling her life had been far from a bed of roses, she still seemed very much a delicate flower.

“I’ll go get our stuff out of the Jeep, and I’ll start up the generator,” I said. “Then I want to get to work for a while.”

She smiled. “I’ll go down in the cellar and figure out what to make for our first dinner.” She took one last look of the room with her entire face lit up. “I can’t believe this is where I will be living and working.” She looked at me and her face grew serious. “Thank you, Price. I promise you that I will be the best assistant you have ever had.”

I nodded and left the room without saying another word. I didn’t want to tell her that it wouldn’t be that hard to be the best assistant since I typically scared them away or they bugged the shit out of me so badly that I fired them for no particular reason other than they annoyed me. I could already tell Tessa wouldn’t annoy me. But it was too soon to tell if the beast of this story would scare away the beauty.

Chapter Five

Tessa

It had been two days, and Price and I had barely said more than a few words to each other. He worked all the time. He was in his office when I woke up in the morning, and he was in his office when I went to bed. The only time he had left was for dinnertime, but even then he sat at the table jotting down notes in a leather journal, or he stared off into space so deep in thought that I was pretty sure he didn't even realize I was sitting across from him. I had no idea what he liked to eat or what he disliked, but he ate everything I put in front of him. Almost in a trance-like state. I seriously doubted he even knew what he was shoveling into his mouth. I had learned that he liked coffee black, and he liked it often. So often, that I was going in and out of his office for most of the day. The house was easy to clean because Price never used any part of it. He slept in his room and that was it. The job was easy. Too easy. I actually found myself with nothing to really keep me occupied, and I wondered if I was doing enough to please him all the time. I tried to stay near him in case he needed anything. I hadn't had a chance to explore the land yet. In fact, I hadn't even stepped outside other than to take out the garbage.

So, I was thrilled when after I was done with the morning dishes, I heard Price calling for me from his office saying he needed some assistance and wanted me to read what he had written so far for his book. Walking into his office with trepidation skipping through my veins, I stiffened my spine, raised my chin, and tried to muster as much courage as I could.

"Go ahead and sit at that desk by the window," Price ordered without even looking up from his computer. "I have my printed manuscript sitting there waiting for you. It's the first three chapters. Feel free to make notes in the margins, and I'll go over them soon." He still didn't look up at me. Price seemed scattered on the surface, but beneath his rich brown eyes, I saw complete focus. He was clearly still lost in his own

thoughts.

I quickly got to reading, and had no idea how long I had been sitting there, but I was completely mesmerized.

Magic.

That was the only word I could come up with to describe what I had just read. I had never read a book and enjoyed it. The bare minimum that I was forced to endure in my life had been for school and just so I could graduate. I couldn't really tell you about any of the stories, or even the titles of most. They truly had been that unmemorable. But not with Price's book. His words hooked me, and I didn't want them to stop. It was almost as if I could actually hear him reading the words to me. His writing gave me a sense of coziness and warmth as if he were reading me a bedtime story tucked beneath my covers. But at the same time, his story was haunting, thrilling, and I waited on anxious breath as I turned the pages.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Magic.

I think Price had expected me to know who he was when he first interviewed me, and maybe he had expected me to fan girl over him, which, of course, never happened. But had I known. Had I read his books before... I have no idea how I would have reacted, because I simply sat there in stunned awe. He was a magician, and I was the lucky one who got to see what was the secret to the tricks.

“How’s it going over there?” he asked, though his fingers never stopped tapping away at the keys.

“Good,” I answered back, having no idea what to say or do. He had said to take notes. Notes on what? Notes on how much I liked it? Notes on how I could never do what he did? Notes on how inadequate I felt to be sitting in the same room with him while he created what I truly felt would be a masterpiece? The man had such skill in the way he weaved the words. They came across poetic and haunting, yet down to earth and real at the same time. I instantly loved his characters. They felt like they were people I knew and could relate with. I never wanted the story to end.

“Are you almost done?”

“Yes,” I lied.

Done with what? I stood up from the desk, feeling the need to run out of the room before he realized what a loser and fraud I was. I had nothing to offer this man, but I didn’t want him to see it written all over my face. The only thing I could do was cook and clean, so maybe if I could win him over that way, I would have a chance of

keeping my job and not being sent home. “I’m going to go cook us some lunch.”

“No,” he snapped. “I need the notes so I can finish this first part and send it off to Brett. He’s waiting, but I want to address your beta notes before I do.”

I froze but then slowly sat back down at my desk. “Okay, almost done. Give me a minute.” A minute? How about a lifetime?

I sat there and stared at the words, wondering how I could fake my way through this. I remembered in high school English, the teachers always spoke of symbolism. I considered writing that the paragraphs had nice symbolism. But what if there wasn’t symbolism? And what if he wanted more details on how or why I believed that. I didn’t even know what symbolism was. I was so lost in thought, that I didn’t hear Price walk up to me, startling a bit as he towered over where I sat with a pen in my hand that had never touched paper.

“I need to get moving on this,” he said. “You’re going to have to work a bit faster to keep up with my pace.” He reached for the pile of papers, brought them back to his desk, and sat down.

I considered telling him that I had no idea what he wanted and didn’t make any notes before he discovered it for himself, but I couldn’t muster up the courage or words. Instead, I sat there frozen as I watched his every move. He took a minute to look at the first page, and then the second, and then the third. By the time he got to the fourth page, he looked up at me, confused.

“Where are the notes? I told you to write them on the margin. Did you do it on a notebook?”

“I... um... I didn’t do any notes.”

“What do you mean you didn’t do any notes?” he snapped. “I told you to. What the hell have you been doing over there?”

His harsh words and tone had me flinching. “I read what you had.”

“And? Why didn’t you do your job? Did I not make myself clear that I wanted your notes? I needed you to be my beta reader. What part of that confused you?”

A defensive bubble was forming around me. I didn’t like his tone of voice, and I felt it was insulting. “You don’t have to talk to me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked, standing up as his eyes darkened. “As your boss who is pissed? I don’t have time for amateur hour. I know you said you didn’t read novels before I hired you, so if you have no desire to read them now—”

“I told you I read it!” I snapped back, feeling as if he had just accused me of being illiterate, or at the very least stupid and lazy.

I knew better than to talk to an employer with that tone of voice, and I also knew I had lost plenty of jobs due to the defensive attitude I got far too easily, but I truly couldn’t help it. I wasn’t going to sit there and not defend myself.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Well, if you read it, then why didn’t you do your job?” His hand hit the top of the desk hard, which not only had me flinching, but had my insides boiling over. He might not like my attitude, and I could lose my job over it, but I didn’t like his either. I didn’t see why he was getting so angry. It was just notes.

“I told you when I hired you, that my rules are the only rules. I run an extremely tight ship when it comes to my career, because I have to. I warned you that I’m a taskmaster, but you haven’t seen that side of me. I was trying my best to give you some time to acclimate before I started with my demands. I don’t believe I asked a lot of you. I wasn’t unreasonable. Asking you to read and take notes definitely is not anywhere near the level of obedience I will eventually expect.”

“Obedience?” I bit back. “I’m not some dog.”

“No, you’re not a dog. A dog would be wise enough to know how to be obedient enough to avoid discipline.”

“Excuse me?” I had no idea what he was getting at. “Maybe this job just isn’t for me. Maybe it’s best I go back to the city.” As I said the words, I instantly regretted them. That was the last thing I truly wanted. I had nothing to go back to, and this house was the closest thing I had to a real home. Plus, being here was practically like being on vacation. Being quick to quit when I didn’t like a boss, or when I felt defensive, was an awful habit of mine, and why I couldn’t keep a job more than a couple of months, and here I was doing it again.

One eyebrow rose above Price’s perfectly chiseled face, but other than that, there was no other expression. “You think that is an option? Really?” He took a deep breath. “I

told you that once you came to the mountain, you stayed on the mountain.”

Rather than calming my defensive nature as I knew I should, my emotions got the best of me. “You can’t keep me here.”

“I can.”

The way he said the words sent a chill down my spine. Whether I liked it or not, I did not have the control over this situation. He did.

“If I want to go home, I can.” Jesus, I was so stupid. Like I had any home to go to, and even if I did, I was not in the driver’s seat here. Saying these words just made me look like a fool, and I knew it.

“I hope you paid attention to the way to town. There’s no bus. No taxi. And it’s a long hike to get there. But if that’s your choice rather than facing the consequences, then I misread you.”

“Misread me?”

“I didn’t take you as a quitter.”

How wrong he was. He had no idea just how easy I would and always had. I stormed to the office door but then froze with my back to him. Where would I go? And how would I get there? And did I really want to quit?

No.

Swallowing my pride, I asked softly, “And if I didn’t quit?”

Chapter Six

Tessa

“Tessa...”

My heart flipped as I looked over my shoulder to see Price sitting on a high-back chair by the fire. His legs spread slightly, his face stern, and his hand patting his lap as if I was supposed to know what that meant.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t have time to fight with you, or to deal with your attitude. So, we’re going to handle this situation my way. If you don’t follow my direction, there will be consequences. Black and white. Simple.”

“Consequences? What do you mean by that?” I asked, feeling butterflies flap around in my tummy.

“Come over here and lie across my lap. I’m going to spank you for your failure to do your job as I asked, and for wasting my time. It’s correction and how I choose to handle this situation.”

“What? Are you serious?” Did he just say he was going to spank me? No way could I have been hearing him correctly, and yet his serious face, the stiff way he sat in the chair, and the fact that he was very clear in the way he spoke, told me he was dead serious.

“Now. My rules. Remember? I don’t have all day. Get over here so we can get this over with and move on with our day,” he commanded in a calm and even tone. The man had regained full control, and though he was threatening to spank me, he did not seem angry or hostile. He actually appeared dignified and nearly regal sitting in the chair with his legs spread wide enough to hold the weight of my draped-over body.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I tried my best to seem calm. This was complete madness, and yet for some reason I wasn't running out of his office. Did I want the job that badly? Or was it something more?

He patted his lap again. "Now, Tessa."

"You've got to be kidding me. I'm not a naughty child who can be punished like that." I let out a forced laugh. "I'm not going to let you sp—do what you just suggested to me, or whatever else you have in mind because you say so."

"Now."

My heart beat so loudly in my ears, I was sure he had to hear it as well. "Price, you've lost your mind. We both have. Things just got a little heated and... Maybe we just need a good lunch and time to forget this ever ha—"

"If I have to get up and drag you over here by your hair, you will regret it. Now get over here and lie across my lap."

Jesus, the man was serious. Dead serious. And even though his threat sounded aggressive in the wording, his tone remained calm and firm.

Not sure what else to do, as nothing I was saying to try to defuse the situation was working, I took the first step toward him. Had I gone insane? Was I really walking toward a spanking? Was I really walking toward Price? And what was it that he was expecting from me once I got there? Did he just want me to lie there on his lap? And then what? Would there be more than just a spanking? I had never been spanked in

my life. What the fuck was I supposed to do, and how would this feel?

Was I seriously even considering this?

With each step I took, my resistance seemed to dissolve, and I was morphing into... willing... or maybe just accepting of my doomed fate. Or maybe it was that the embarrassment and shame of this entire situation was just too much, and I simply wanted it over with.

I stood before him, eyes cast down, praying he would direct me on exactly what he wanted me to do next, because there was no way I would be able to even guess.

“Lift up your skirt and bare yourself. I’m not going to spank you over the fabric,” he commanded so easily. Did he not find his words, and what he was asking me to do out of the ordinary? He seemed so cool and casual, and acted as if this was just an everyday occurrence for an underperforming employee.

Attempting to drum up the nerve to pull up my skirt and lie over his lap, I peeked up and made eye contact. With our eyes connected, I felt the thundering beat of my heart, a tingle between my legs, and a bizarre nervous desire rocking my body. With one powerful expression that told me he was losing his patience and I better act fast, he gave me the courage to surrender to his discipline. When I pulled up my skirt, I shuddered as the warm air from the roaring fire in the room touched my ass that the thong panties did very little to conceal.

He stared down at my panties. His eyes seemed to darken as he took in every lacy inch. “Lower those.”

I paused, not sure I had the inner strength to do as he asked. He hadn’t seen my body exposed before. This was far from appropriate, and I wasn’t sure I was willing to be nude from the waist down, no matter his belief that I needed correction and

consequences.

“Mr. Anderson,” I began.

“I plan to spank you the proper way, Miss Stanton. Naughty behavior deserves the shame of a bare bottom spanking.” He glanced at my panties again. “Remove them and lie across my lap. You have wasted enough of my time as it is.” The way his thick accent said the words had jolts of electricity sizzling through my veins. The sane and reasonable part of me wanted to scream no and storm out of the room, but the sinful and wicked part of me wanted to do exactly what he commanded without hesitation.

My mind and body were at war, and I wasn’t sure which one I wanted to win, and which one would be defeated.

“If I have to do it for you,” he said, breaking my internal dialogue, “I will add more swats to the already high number you’re to receive.”

This was for real. Oh, my God, this was for real.

My mind might have been screaming no, but my body did exactly as he asked, and I lowered my panties to my knees, standing with my bottom half nude before him.

“You keep your pussy bare as I prefer,” he said as his eyes seemed to darken right before me. Even though he was staring at the most intimate part of my body, I didn’t feel threatened or afraid.

Humiliated, yes.

Ashamed, most definitely.

Nervous, without a doubt.

But never did I truly fear this man.

“It’s a habit of mine. I like the look and feel of it.” I could feel the heat of his stare on my bare pussy, but I didn’t try to conceal myself. I stood and awaited his next command.

“Good.” His eyes looked back into mine. “Bend over,” he directed, his voice husky.

Suffocated by the fear of the unknown, I did exactly as he asked without any hesitation, though missing the way he hungrily gazed at my body. Lying over his lap, I twisted my head over my shoulder to see his face. The strong features, the firm air, the sensitive but unyielding eyes.

He removed my panties completely without saying a word, quickly following with a swat to my bare behind. Once. Twice. The spanking continued as heat rippled over my body in waves, leaving me breathless. “Price,” I whispered. “I—”

Further words were lost as he spanked my ass completely. The sting made me want to beg for mercy, yet also left me oddly craving more. Every time his palm made contact with my bare skin, it hurt like hell, and yet I couldn’t help but like the fact that Price was touching me. His hand was on my nude skin, and the thrill of that

knowledge almost made the pain disappear.

Almost.

“Price, please. I feel you have made your point.” I wasn’t sure if it was the angle of my head hanging toward the floor or how embarrassed I was to be treated in such a demeaning way, but my face felt as if it were boiling beneath the surface.

Price continued to swat my upturned ass over and over before he finally answered me. “I will decide when this punishment is over. Not you.” The next swat was even harder than all the others combined, clearly his way of showing me where my demands would land me. “I’m also not going to tolerate you threatening to leave every single time you don’t like what I say or what I do.” I didn’t think his spanking could get harder, but somehow the swats grew in intensity. “And trust me, you’re not going to like many things I do. Especially how I handle correction. This is how I handle correction.” He slapped each cheek one time, and then asked, “How do I handle misbehavior?”

“By giving me a...” No way could I actually say the word out loud. No way. My face heated up even more at the thought of that word coming from my mouth.

“Giving you a what?” Price continued on with the spanking, and I knew deep down that the spanking could, and would, get worse if I didn’t answer him—embarrassed or not.

“A spanking.”

“Yes, by spanking you. Expect more of these in the future if you don’t follow my rules.”

And the spanking continued. Would it ever end?

The worst part of the entire spanking was the unknown. I didn't know how long this would last. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, and I didn't know what was going through Price's mind. Did he like spanking me? Did he like what he saw... my bare ass writhing on his thighs as I pursed my lips together to try not to cry out?

After a few more volleys of punishing slaps to an area of flesh where my thighs met my butt, he asked, "Will you put us both in this situation again? Will you force me to discipline you again for not doing your job properly?"

I shook my head, but when I got one extremely stinging swat to my ass in response, I practically howled, "No! No, sir. I will not be needing discipline again."

"You will read my work and take notes as I ask?"

"Yes, sir." Though I still wasn't sure if that was a skill I truly possessed. But the last thing I was going to do in my current situation was argue with him.

I was hoping that my compliant answers would be enough, but they weren't. The spanking continued, and I truly didn't think I could handle one more swat of his hand. My skin burned, and sweat beaded on my upper lip as my body continued to gyrate on his steady and sturdy lap. Moaning, gasping, whimpering, I closed my eyes and gave myself up to the moment... to Price and his dominance. I had no other choice but to release all my thoughts, my worries, and my resistance.

Yes, I thought as he swatted my behind relentlessly. This is what I needed. This is what I craved without even knowing it. Not just a spanking, but a spanking by Price. Somehow this all seemed right. So fucking wrong, but so fucking right.

He paused a moment, rubbing his hand along my heated flesh. Dipping his finger down the crease of my butt, he pressed past the cheeks of my ass and rested his finger on the entrance of my tight rosebud, teasing me with the unknown of what was to

come.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Maybe I should have stopped him, or at the very least tensed up, but I didn't. I didn't scream no, though I should have. I didn't shoot up off his lap, though I should have. I didn't curse him out in outrage, though I should have. Had he spanked all the resistance out of my body? Had he beat my backside into complete submission? Or was I so desperate for any touch besides the searing swats, that his hand giving me anything besides pain was welcome?

Slight pressure was added, but not enough to break past the puckered flesh and enter me fully. Slowly, he lowered his finger to my silky folds, pulsing with desire. I didn't know if it was the spanking that caused it or not, but I was dripping wet, and there was no hiding my hunger from Price who now spread the signs around my bare skin.

A deep moan rumbled in his chest and escaped as he thrust his finger, followed by a second, into my hungry sex. I bucked against his hand, mewling in pleasure. Lightheaded and panting with the need for more, I did everything I could not to beg to be fucked right then and there. The fingers weren't enough. I needed his cock buried inside of me. I needed it thick, long, and hard, and I had no shame in admitting that fact.

His two fingers were soon followed by a third, as he pumped in and out of me, demanding my passion. Crying out as he stretched me wide, I'm not sure how I knew, but I knew it was required so I could comfortably take the size of his dick. It was his silent way of warning me of what was to come. It was if I could read his sinful and dirty thoughts.

Lying over his knee, recently spanked, I could do nothing more than allow the climax to build. And when he removed his slick fingers and pressed one into my anus

without warning, the orgasm rocked my body at an intensity that had me screaming out. Submission exploded through my body like the crack of a leather whip. Moaning, I pressed back against his hand, driving his finger deeper into my forbidden channel, his touch entrenched within me as I melted against him. I liked his finger inside of my ass, and had no shame in admitting that I did.

With one hand buried in the taboo place, he placed the palm of his other hand on my still searing behind, continuing on with the spanking. One, two, three, I finally freed my mind and stopped counting as the spanking continued. My breath caught in my throat as I held back a cry of erotic yearning and years of need. I couldn't focus, lost in a haze of ecstasy. Pleasure and pain wove themselves together, escalating until I cried out his name.

After the final swat, he cupped his hand over my pussy, using it to adjust my body until I was tucked snugly into his arms. Unconsciously, I nuzzled my face against the warmth of his neck, and my body melted against him. The feelings, the emotions... nothing could describe them other than safe and cherished. He had handled me his way, and I had allowed it. What I didn't expect was this aftermath. I didn't expect to enjoy his warm and soothing touch after the harsh sting.

He slipped his hand around my waist, lowering me to the rug-covered floor below. Fingers laced, thighs rubbing against thighs, my breasts molded into his torso, the clothing between us begging to be ripped off. Not wasting another moment, Price unzipped his pants, freeing his hard cock from its restraints. He knelt before my face and placed his thick shaft to my lips. I looked up and into his eyes. No words needed to be said. I opened up my mouth and allowed his cock to lie against my tongue. My natural instinct was to pleasure him. Nothing got in the way of how badly I wanted to make him groan out my name. Watching bliss blanket his face filled me with a purpose I had not known existed, and I wondered if I would ever get to experience again in my lifetime. As I hungrily sucked his ready dick, I fully submitted to a man who demanded it. Up and down, I moved my mouth until I was

rewarded by my name escaping his lips in the most passionate of ways. My name never sounded as good as it did the moment it slipped from his mouth.

I added my hand and began to pump his cock while licking all around it. His body shook and tensed, and he pulled me away as he took a deep breath.

“I’ve fantasized about your kiss,” he said, his gaze dipping to my lips.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Reflexively, I moistened them, slipping my tongue across my mouth, waiting for his to make contact. Slowly, we kissed, soft, romantic, and pure. He slid his hand to my pussy, driving my thirst for sex to a whole new level. I felt nearly driven to the edge, wanting desperately to beg him for more. “Please, Price. I need you.”

I guided my hands up under his shirt, releasing a long sigh when they ran along the defined muscles of his body. The mature years of his life had been good to him, very, very good.

While my fingers went to work releasing the buttons of his shirt, he nibbled on my ear, my neck, driving my need even higher. In a hungered blur, I pulled off clothing that got in the way, followed by him doing the same.

Price cupped my face and planted a slow, deep kiss on my lips. His mouth blazed a path from my mouth back to the side of my neck. I let a sensual moan escape my lips, hoping to encourage him to keep going.

Skimming my fingers down his rippled stomach, I touched the head of his hard cock. “I want this. Now,” I commanded.

He paused for a moment, gazing over my nude body as he did. “My God, Tessa. You’re more beautiful than I imagined.”

Simply looking at his hard, thick erection brought on the beginning of an orgasm by sight alone as I continued to stroke the tip with my fingertips. The mere thought of what was to come almost drove me over the edge.

He leaned forward, took hold of my hips, and pulled me closer to him. Kiss by kiss, he lowered himself down until his face was inches from my sex.

“I want the taste of you on my tongue.” He didn’t wait for permission, but rather kissed my pussy, followed by licking my throbbing clit.

I tensed at the intimate and tantalizing touch. Part of me wanted to stop, and the other part wanted the feeling to never end. He swirled his tongue in circles, lapping up every sign of my arousal. I moaned with complete abandon. My body seemed possessed by Satan himself. I had absolutely no power against him. Lick after lick, Price brought my body to another level. Just when I believed I could take no more, he thrust his finger past the lips of my pussy. In and out he plunged, pulling gasps and moans from me.

I needed more. So much more, and luckily Price didn’t make me wait long. I gasped at the sensation of his cock finally pressing against me.

Closing my eyes in ecstasy, I dug my fingers into his shoulders as he pressed beyond the tightness, entering me completely. The delicious sting was quickly replaced with an erotic pleasure that captured my breath.

He continued to place gentle kisses all over my neck and face, while his thick shaft probed deeper within. The contrast of soft and hard managed to push me toward that familiar edge. Sparks, electricity, pure animalistic need washed over me, drowning me in pleasure as we both rocked each other into completion.

Chapter Seven

Price

What the fuck just happened? I still lay on top of Tessa as we both regained our

normal breathing, the bulk of my body crushing her tiny frame as the weight of the world crushed against me. This wasn't planned. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. I needed to punish her. Correct behavior and demand respect. We still had a long time to live and work together ahead of us, and I knew I needed to set firm guidelines and rules. But I'd had no intentions of fucking her. That muddled the waters. That turned them pitch fucking black.

Rolling off of her, I stood up and quickly dressed. I didn't want to look at Tessa lying on my study floor, no doubt looking sexier than she ever had. So. Fucking. Hot. That woman did something to me, and as my cock twitched again for round two, I reached for her scattered clothes and tossed them to her, still avoiding looking at her again.

"I'm sorry if things got carried away," I said, though there was nothing truly sorry in me. I loved every damn moment of what just happened, but I did owe her an apology. "My plan was to spank you for your wrongdoings. Sex wasn't part of that. I want you to know that in the future, I will still correct you in the same manner I just did, but I will not expect sex to follow."

In the corner of my eye, I saw her putting her clothes back on, starting with her panties and skirt. I'm sure there were a million things running through her head. They sure as hell were running through mine. Deciding to man up, and stop being such a fucking coward by not looking at her and not giving her the respect of my full attention, I put out my hand to help her to stand. Still clutching her shirt to cover her breasts—her delicious and luscious breasts—she took my hand and allowed me to assist her off the floor.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Her big blue eyes met mine. So wide. So innocent. So full of questions. Questions I didn't have answers for. It wasn't hard to see that Tessa was not the type to just casually have sex. I knew she wasn't that type of girl, and therefore, what just happened between us was most likely fucking her up as much as it was me.

"I guess I will go make us some lunch," she said softly, being the first to break our stare.

Releasing the breath I hadn't realized I had been holding, I said, "Yes, that would be nice. I really need to get back to work. I promised Brett some chapters today."

Without saying another word, she rushed out of the room, her shirt still not on, her ballet flats forgotten behind, and her dignity left in tatters.

I was an asshole.

But I at least had warned her of that fact before she agreed to be kept on the mountain.

* * *

Tessa

Standing in the kitchen staring out the window, I could barely see the pine trees in front of me. My mind sifted through a thick fog of confusion and lust. I couldn't even put what had just occurred in words if I had to.

Price spanked me.

Price fucked me.

And I had loved every single minute of it.

Everything about what just happened in his office was wrong. Inappropriate for an employer and his employee. I'm sure there were laws against this and he could get in a lot of trouble for what he just did... but for what I not only allowed him to do, but wanted. I mean... maybe I didn't want the spanking. It hurt like hell, but... but...

Hearing the water boiling over, I rushed over to the pasta I was cooking us for lunch. I was preparing a meal as my job description dictated. But did my job description say I had to be spanked like an errant child?

He did say the rules were his rules.

But did the job description say he could put a finger in my butt?

I chuckled to myself. He had also said there wasn't an HR department to go running to. And even if there were, what would I say?

"Mr. Anderson put his fingers in my pussy, and then put one in my ass, making me come harder than I have in my entire life."

Yes, I could just hear me saying those words to some paper pusher behind a desk.

Finishing up dishing up lunch, I wasn't sure if he wanted me to bring him his plate or not. Normally he ate at his desk, but things were thrown off today. I didn't know if we just went back to normal, or if we had to redefine what our normal was.

As if reading my mind, Price came out into the main room and walked toward the dining table. “It smells good,” he said as he took his usual seat at the head of the table.

Taking his lead, I brought our plates the table. “I made pasta primavera,” I said. “I hope it’s okay.” I still didn’t know what this man liked to eat. Odd since I knew how he liked his cock sucked.

“I really like your cooking,” he praised for the first time. “I know I haven’t told you that, and I also know I haven’t said much of anything since we arrived.”

“You warned me that would happen,” I said as I sat down to join him.

“I know. But still. I can be a decent human being to you. And now that...” He took a large bite of his pasta and chewed as he stared directly into my eyes. Swallowing, he continued, “Now that we have had sex—”

“Like you said,” I interrupted. “Things got carried away.”

“No,” he said. “Yes, that is what I said, but that is not what I meant. The truth of the matter was I wanted what happened in there to happen, and I know I will want it to happen again. I already do.”

I froze mid-chew, not sure if I had heard him correctly. Had he just said he wants to have sex again? Now?

“I’m not one for playing games. I don’t fuck around, and say what I mean. So that bullshit line in there was just that. Bullshit.”

“I don’t understand. What does this mean?”

“It means I want to add an additional job description. Being a beta reader is obviously not exactly a skill of yours, and I don’t want to force you, or get notes from you that aren’t really genuine just to avoid my wrath. So I think I have a better idea. Consider it other duties.” His devilish grin and the way his brown eyes sparkled was a complete contrast to the firm and controlled demeanor of the man who had issued discipline to my backside only a short time before.

“What other duties?” I struggled to get the words out.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“After you left to make lunch, I was able to get new and fresh words on paper. Some of the best stuff I have written since arriving. Our little session did my muse good, and I plan to keep that happening. Sexual tension, which frankly I have felt since you walked in my door, is not good for my creative output. Whereas feeding the hunger is exactly what I need, what I want, and what I will expect from this point on.” He took a bite of food, which gave me the time to process the words he was saying. “So with that said, I understand this was not part of the original deal. I can’t expect this from you without renegotiation or offering you the chance to leave. So if you aren’t willing to accept the new job as I have morphed it, then I understand.”

“So you want what exactly?” I asked.

“You. I want you.”

Chapter Eight

Tessa

The blush took over my entire body without warning. I looked away and tried to regain my composure. The notorious Price Anderson had a way of making me feel like a giddy little schoolgirl, and I hated it. But I did not hate him. No, my feelings were the polar opposite of hate, but just as powerful.

Price smirked. “I like the way you embarrass so easily. I’m starting to notice all the little things about you, and I’m finding I enjoy them all.”

I turned my head to look into Price’s smiling eyes. The soft wrinkles at the edges

gave his sexy charm a sense of maturity. He kept my stare locked within his for what seemed like an eternity. His gaze single-handedly melted my heart. I oozed from the inside out. He had a power over my emotions that I was not used to allowing. His strength, his intoxicating dark demeanor, his aura just screamed out, ‘Man.’

Without looking away, Price slowly walked to my side of the table and leaned in toward me, with his mouth only inches from mine. “I want to feel your lips on me.”

He wasn’t asking permission, yet announcing his intent. So Price Anderson.

I looked down at his mouth and then back into his eyes and softly whispered, “I’d like that.”

He placed a hand on each side of my head, and softly pressed his lips to mine. The touch sent tingles through my entire body. Never had a simple kiss given me such a powerful, intense reaction with anyone else. It was just a kiss, and yet so much more.

The power this man had over me...

His lips moved slowly along mine until his tongue lightly pressed past my lips. The warmth and the wetness increased the desire building inside my core. His fingers caressed my hair softly as his tongue continued to explore. A kiss, a high-inducing kiss, was more than I could imagine. I could smell Price, taste Price, and feel Price. I hungered for more. I wanted the kiss to last forever—never wanting his lips to leave mine.

“You feel so right,” Price murmured between our entwined breaths.

The sound of his voice, muffled by the kiss, provoked an involuntary gasp, revealing how locked in his hold I had become. Never would I have thought I would feel so much power from a simple kiss. At that moment, the only thing I wanted was for him

to never stop.

His hands moved down my back, and he pulled me to standing so we could be closer. My breasts pressed firmly to his rock-hard chest with only thin layers of cotton between us. As our bodies merged, our kiss became more frenzied. Price pressed his tongue deeper within my mouth. I responded by parting my lips wider and dancing my tongue with his. My breath mixed with his, my gasps swallowed by the kiss.

The all-consuming, most mind-blowing kiss.

A kiss that I never knew could exist. With one single kiss, Mr. Anderson—a man I should have avoided—had captured my heart even more than it had already been possessed by our passionate sex before.

Slowly pulling away, he looked deep into my eyes. His own glazed over as desire coursed across his face. He ran a single finger along my jawline and traced it along the edge of my needy lips. A small seductive smile formed as he leaned forward and kissed the tip of my nose.

We both stared at each other for a few moments, scanning each other's face, searching for a peek into our souls.

"I don't usually act like this. I don't usually kiss... well, this is just not like me." I felt the need to apologize, ashamed that I liked the kiss as much as I did. That deep down I didn't want it to stop.

"This isn't me, either." He smiled. "To actually enjoy and crave a simple kiss like that so much. I kiss when I fuck, but not controlled like this. But with you..."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I took a deep breath before speaking. “So if this isn’t the way we are... Why do I want... more? This is fast, Price. You and I both know it. Too fast. I work for you and...”

Price lowered his mouth to mine again, silencing my words. He kissed with more passion this time, and with more excitement than before. His mouth continued to claim mine as I could feel his desire building—my desire building. I inhaled at the sudden change but pulled him closer with my hands clinging desperately to his back.

“I can’t explain this. I can’t explain why I want you so badly, so quickly. Tell me to stop and I will. Tell me no, and I will back away this second.” Price paused from his onslaught of kisses to examine my face. “You don’t have to accept your other duties, but I sure as fuck hope you do.”

I smiled at the look of concern mixed with passion on his face. “I accept the added duties. I want this, too. I don’t know why. I don’t know how it happened. All I do know is that I want to feel you inside of me.”

“Tessa,” Price moaned.

He moved his mouth to my neck and started to place soft kisses there, while his hand slowly worked its way under my shirt and bra. His palm cupped my breast, and I arched my back to meet his touch. His lips moved to my ear, and he lightly nipped. I could hear his ragged breathing and feel his body tense with pent-up passion.

I lowered my hand to his bulging erection pressed against his pants. When my fingers made contact, Price groaned in desire.

“Fuck! I want to be soft. I want to be gentle... but you are driving me crazy.”

I undid his belt buckle, unbuttoned and unzipped his pants in one fluid motion. “I don’t want soft. I don’t want gentle. I want you to take me. Take me hard,” I demanded as I wrapped my hand around his throbbing cock.

He grabbed and pushed me hard up against the wall. Reaching for my hands, guiding them above my head, holding them firm with one hand, his other ripped off my clothing. He yanked, he tugged, and he had me naked before I could even take my next breath. His lips pressed against mine with such force, such fierce command.

I had never felt such strength, such domination before this day. First with the spanking and unexpected sex, and now with this round. This time was different, however. We were going into this with eyes wide open.

Price moved his lips to my neck and began to kiss, suck, and bite. With my arms still pinned above my head by his massive hand, I had no choice but to allow Price to do as he wished.

I felt the sting of his teeth on my neck and mewled, trying to not focus on the fact that I stood completely naked before him.

He picked me up and carried me to his room before I could fully comprehend what was happening. I was in his arms, I could feel his muscled chest flex beneath me. I could hear his heavy breathing thick with desire. I could smell his intoxicating scent. My head spun; I was consumed with lust, drunk with passion.

Before I could regain composure, he threw me down onto his bed. I saw him grab a black satin ribbon from a bedside table. I wondered what other wicked items he had in that table. He grabbed one hand and tied it to the bedpost, and then he did the same with the other. I had never been tied, never been defenseless. I tugged to see if I could

escape, pulled to see if this was for real. With a mixture of fear and desire, I allowed myself to trust Price, but at the same time, take delight in the sizzle of fear that coursed through my veins. I was helpless. There was nothing I could do to fight him off. I couldn't stop what would happen next. And yet, even as my heart skipped, I loved the feeling. The complete abandon. Knowing he was now fully in control.

He stood before me and took off all of his clothes in the same rush and fury that had landed me naked and tied to his bed. His ripped, tight body stood before me in all its glory. With hungry eyes, he stared down at my body stretched out on his bed and seductively smiled.

"It's about time I got you in my bed. I plan to make this a habit of my day. To feed my hungry muse."

I smiled. "We must keep that muse of yours happy."

"It's now your job."

"I plan to be an overachieving employee," I teased back.

Price reached for more ribbon, grabbed one of my legs, and tied one ankle to the bedpost and then secured the other, spreading me wide open. In mere moments, I found myself sprawled out on Price's bed, in Price's control. I tried to move, tried to test the strength of the bonds. A shiver ran down my spine when I couldn't move. I was his. Yes, I was his.

“Price...” I moaned.

He kissed one breast and then the other. He sucked each nipple, slightly nipping with his teeth. I gasped, I moaned. I had never been restricted before and not able to hold on to someone. The feeling of being defenseless was terrifying but electrifying at the same time.

“Please. I want to hold you,” I begged. The need to touch his skin consumed me.

Ignoring my plea, he continued his descent down my abdomen with kisses. He reached his final destination, his lips caressing every ounce of flesh, licking my entire mound until I was desperate for more. I was dying to feel his tongue delve into me. I wanted to feel the invasion, the penetration. The man had a way of intensifying every emotion and sensation in my body. I needed him. I hungered for him. I craved everything about him. Yet, I knew the ultimate power was his, and he would lead this delicious dance as he saw fit.

“Price!” I screamed when his tongue connected with my clit. A surge of sensation stole my breath. “I want you,” I pleaded as I tested the ties again. I was aching to touch, desperate to have some control back.

My body frantically searched for release any way that I could as I shamelessly ground my pussy against his face and mouth. I needed to come. God, I hoped he’d make me come. But I needed more than his mouth. I needed his cock in me, and just as I was about to demand he fuck me, he moved away from my needy cunt and lowered his body on top of mine. I tried to reach for him. I tried to embrace his body. But the constraints of the ties held me in place.

“Untie me,” I begged.

He simply shook his head and slowly eased his way in between my legs. He captured my gaze and never released it as his cock spread me wide. He stared deep into my eyes, linking our souls, connecting our energy.

He pressed deeper with every gasp from me as if my sounds of pleasure fueled the energy and desire inside of him.

I moaned.

He pressed on.

I cried out.

He fucked me harder.

His own moans became my soundtrack to the most amazing sex of my life.

Price pressed deep within and suddenly stopped. Without either of our bodies moving, I could feel nothing more than Price rooted within me. Taking that moment of stillness did something to me. I felt a connection and closeness I hadn't known possible. I looked into his eyes and just smiled. It began with just my lips, but staring into Price's face, I knew my pleasure was reflected in his eyes.

“I'm yours,” I admitted freely.

“I wanted nothing more than to hear those words.”

“Untie me. Let me show you how much I'm yours. Let me prove how much I want to belong to you,” I whispered.

Price lightly touched his lips to mine, pulled his cock out of me, and then slowly untied one hand and then the other. He took his time and after each bond was removed, he kissed and licked the reddened area to soothe the sting. I hadn't realized how much I'd fought against the restraints until he did so.

Once all the ties were removed, I crawled into his lap, pressed my lips to his neck, and took the moment to just be held and feel protected. I enjoyed the soft, the calm... the love. I moved my lips to his and kissed him until I felt that our lips had melted together. His breath was mine, my breath was his. I felt his tongue lightly move along, his hands caressed, we embraced.

He eased me onto my back and slowly rubbed his cock along my throbbing clit. The sensation sent an emotion through me that nearly brought tears to my eyes. I became whole, so complete. Having him so close to me felt... right.

He moved the tip of his dick at a slow and sensual pace. He caressed my hair and smiled softly while looking into my eyes. "I can't do soft any longer. I need to fuck you hard before I explode," Price confessed.

A growl worked its way past his lips as he grabbed me by the hips and in one hard thrust, drove himself deep within the warmth of my body. I wrapped my legs tighter around his back and thrust my hips to drive him even deeper. I moaned at the feeling of him spreading me, further inside me than I ever imagined possible. I craved more. I wanted him to drive in and out at a rapid pace.

I felt like a sex-crazed vixen beneath him as he pumped in and out with a force and speed that brought an impending orgasm near. He grabbed me by the hair and pulled my lips to his again. He drove his tongue deep within my mouth, never letting go of his grip. He dominated me with the pull, with the thrust of his hips, and with the power he had over the building explosion of pleasure begging for release.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Let go for me. Let go, baby,” he demanded with a deep sensual voice.

As if knowing I should never go against one of Price’s commands, I let the climax take over. The fire worked its way from my toes all the way to my head. My moan became louder, louder until it became a scream.

With the sound of my release ringing throughout the room, he pumped hard one last time, filling me with his seed. Claiming me. Marking me. Forever his.

All because of one simple kiss.

Chapter Nine

Price

It had been a month? Maybe two? I had completely lost track of time, which was just part of the process. My world became my book, but this time was different. This time I had Tessa, and I wanted Tessa just as much as I wanted to write. I couldn’t get enough of the woman. If I wasn’t fucking her, I would make her stay in my office just so I could look at her whenever I wanted, or smell her, or touch her, or fuck her all over again. It seemed my cock remained in constant need of attention, and the only way to cure the ailment was having it buried deep inside of this woman... my drug.

But one thing still remained the same. I was an asshole.

She deserved better than me. I couldn’t give her much more than sex. I tried to stop writing for dinner so that I could give her some attention and learn about the woman I

couldn't get enough of, but my mind struggled to focus. I had yet to do anything with her that couples would do. There was no wining and dining. My life consisted of fucking and writing. Not a bad life for me, but I also believed Tessa deserved better.

"Tessa," I called out, finally deciding that it was time I took a break.

She must have been near my office because she padded barefoot into my office holding a dishtowel in her hand. She wore jeans and a white t-shirt and had never looked sexier. Casual and comfortable was a good look on her.

With one eyebrow raised, she asked, "Do you need something? Dinner isn't for a couple of hours. I still need to start it."

"Don't," I said. "Let's go into town. It's about time I take you on a date."

"A date?" she asked as a smile grew on her face. "Really?"

"We haven't gone into town yet, and I know our supplies are really low. Why not go into town and get groceries and then get that prime rib dinner I told you about? We can share a bottle of wine and make a romantic evening out of it."

"Yes!" she replied fast. Maybe a little too fast, which told me that the poor girl was desperate for some attention, and probably to get out of the house. She and I had taken some walks together on the grounds, but I'm sure she was getting a bit stir-crazy. "You don't think it's snowing too badly?"

I glanced out the window to see that a light snow was falling. "It's fine. I don't think the storm is supposed to come in until tomorrow night. This is minor." I looked at her bare feet. "Go get some shoes on. We'll leave now."

I didn't have to say another word. Tessa spun on her heels and ran upstairs. I could

hear her excitement as she padded up the staircase and it reminded me of a child running down to a tree with presents underneath on Christmas morning.

The drive into town was fairly quiet. I hadn't turned off my brain yet and was still unfortunately thinking about how I was going to write the next chapter. Though it didn't seem that Tessa minded. She just sat in her seat and listened to music as the snowy wonderland passed us by. The roads weren't bad, and nothing my Jeep couldn't handle. I didn't even need to use four-wheel drive yet, so I had no concerns that we had to rush back. We could enjoy a nice evening out. We both deserved it.

"I should have taken you down here for this dinner sooner," I said as my eyes quickly locked with hers. "I apologize for that."

"No need. I knew what I was getting myself into when I accepted the job."

"Did you really?" I asked as I put my eyes back on the road.

"You warned me that it would be long hours of me alone with little to do. I knew you would hibernate in your office. What I didn't know was that—"

"That I would ask you to sit near my desk completely naked as I wrote," I said, finishing her sentence for her. The image of Tessa buck naked on a chair at her desk made my cock instantly hard.

Giggling, she said, "I couldn't have imagined that."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“You’ve truly become my muse. There is no better word to describe it. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all,” she confessed. “I’m glad I can help in any way that I can.”

When we reached the small market, I pulled up at the entrance to drop Tessa off so she didn’t have to walk through the parking lot in the snow. “I’m going to park and make a call to Brett and check in. Go ahead and start shopping for everything we need. I’ll be in there in a second.”

“Is there anything in particular that you want?” she asked.

“As long as you keep cooking the way you do, I leave that all in your hands.” The girl could cook. There wasn’t a meal she had made that I didn’t like. But again, I don’t think I truly complimented her enough except sexually when we were in the middle of fucking. “You’ve spoiled me. You’re an excellent cook and I trust you completely to make sure I’m well fed. Thank you.”

She hopped out of the Jeep with a beaming smile. “Okay, see you soon.”

As I pulled into the parking spot, I called Brett and didn’t have to wait long for him to answer.

“Price! How’s it going? I haven’t heard from you today and was about to send out the search party.”

“Just busy,” I answered. “I’m getting close to the end of the first draft. You know

how it is.”

“Busy, huh? Busy with your hot little assistant,” he teased.

The fucker always had a way of reading me and knowing exactly what was going on with me. “It’s not like that.”

“No? You haven’t fucked her yet?”

“Well...”

He let out a loud guffaw. “I knew it. I knew you hired her for her tight little ass.”

“I did not,” I defended, though her tight little ass was calling my name. I would be lying if I hadn’t pictured myself buried deep inside of that tiny little hole that with time, I planned to make mine. “It’s not like you think. She’s a really cool chick who—”

“Who you are fucking,” Brett interrupted with a laugh. “But whatever. If it feeds your muse and gets that book done, then more power to her and you. Fuck away, my friend. I like the sexual undertones to this thriller. It has far less horror elements than what you are usually known for, but I think the readers are going to appreciate this new spice you are bringing to the story. Your fuck buddy does your writing good.”

Well, he was correct about that. Tessa had truly become my muse. I had never written such sensual scenes before, and even my overall plot had more tension and angst, and I was happy that Brett could see it in the pages I had already sent him.

“It may be my best book yet,” I boasted, feeling a sense of pride. “But I need to go. I just wanted to check in and tell you the book is close to done. I want to finish up the first draft before I send any more to you. So you are going to have to be patient.”

“Fine by me. Just don’t get too wrapped up in the little miss and forget your true reason for being up on the mountain.”

* * *

Tessa

I had never eaten prime rib before. I didn’t want to admit that fact to Price, or admit that I had never drunk an expensive bottle of wine until dinners at the cabin. He was a man who clearly could enjoy the finer things in life, and I didn’t want him to know just how inexperienced I was at that in all regards.

“They have great prime rib, right?” he asked as he placed another piece of meat into his mouth.

“It’s so good,” I said as I took in every savory taste.

The restaurant wasn’t exactly fancy—at least not white tablecloths and candlelight—but it did have a roaring fire, leather booths, and the rustic charm of the decor made the entire place feel warm and inviting. I loved it, and I loved every minute of my first date with Price.

“So, tell me,” he said as he sipped from his wine. “What are your thoughts so far about living on the mountain? Is it what you pictured?”

“I like it. I actually love it. It’s extremely beautiful, especially when it snows. I could sit and stare at it all day.”

“It’s my favorite part as well. A fire and a snowstorm make for a perfect day.” He paused as he chewed his meat and then swallowed, never breaking his stare. “Are you bored?”

I diverted my eyes and shrugged. “Not really bored. More like...”

I took a drink of my wine and stared at the fire. I didn't want to be honest with how I truly felt. I didn't want to upset him or make him feel like I was being that needy woman who scares off men. I didn't want to tell him that I was confused beyond belief. That I didn't know what he wanted from me or expected. Were we a couple? Fuck buddies? Was I truly just an employee? Frankly... was I a whore just selling my body for pay? My mind never shut up. He wasn't ever affectionate except during sex or leading right up to it. He admitted he wasn't the kissing and hugging type. He didn't act like a boyfriend... but what would that even look like? And the fact that this was our first date yet we had had sex more times than I could count, only added to my confusion.

“More like what?”

“Nothing really.”

“Tessa...”

I looked back at him and gave a big smile. A big fake smile to divert his questions. “Just getting used to the isolation and the wilderness is all.”

I was always good at pretending everything was all right when it wasn't. And it wasn't like things were bad. They weren't. They were amazing. Maybe too amazing, and that was the problem. I was falling for Price like I had never fallen for anyone. Thank God he wanted me in his office practically twenty-four/seven because I couldn't imagine being anywhere but with him. I loved watching him work. The way his brows furrowed together as his fingers tapped on the keys at an insanely fast speed always amazed me. I had never dated an intelligent man before, and Price was by far the smartest most sophisticated man I had ever met. And again, why would I even use the word 'dated' in thought. We weren't dating... unless you counted this moment eating prime rib and drinking wine.

“Do you miss the television?” he asked.

“Not at all. I thought I would, but you keep me busy.”

He chuckled. “My other duties part of the job demands a lot.”

“It does,” I flirted back, drinking my wine as I looked over the table with hooded

eyes.

“I plan to demand more. Darker and dirtier demands.”

“I hope you do.”

“You better hurry up and finish because I don’t know how long I can hold out.”

I giggled, feeling the wine reach my head but also from the overwhelming sense of happiness taking over. I was giddy in love... well... whatever it was I was feeling.

Price leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table. In a low voice, he said, “I’m going to take you home, to my bed, and I’m going to fuck you hard. I’m going to fuck you until you scream out my name. Not cry. Not moan. Scream.”

Chapter Ten

Tessa

I snuggled up next to him the next morning after wine-infused sex that blew my mind as every time with Price did, wondering if I should seduce him and go for round two. I didn’t want to wake him... okay, I totally wanted to wake him. But would he be mad if I did?

My answer came when our lips met, a pull neither could resist any longer. Our hunger was never satiated. His heart beat against mine as he arranged my body closer. The single kiss had the power to forever bind. The kiss was the period to the sentence. One kiss spoke volumes of what was meant—a dictate of love and passion.

I wanted him.

I wanted him this very second... again.

Now.

Price sucked my breast, then moved to the other to give it equal attention. Lowering his hand to my mound, damp with fresh arousal, he dipped a finger to my clit and applied pressure as he roused an overwhelming longing that had me gasping for air. Moving from my clit, he pressed his fingers past my silky folds and pushed one, then two digits into my sex. I forced my hips up to drive them inside my pussy even deeper. They weren't enough. I wanted to feel the small bite of pain as his cock stretched me as he claimed what was now his. I wanted to feel him so badly that the hunger changed who I was.

I was an animal.

I was a stalker in search of its victim.

I was a woman who needed to be fucked hard by her man. Her man who had been missing but now was found.

Not being able to hold back the fever that scorched me, I begged, "Please, Price. Please..."

"Please what?" he asked as he danced his fingers inside my core. "Say it, Tessa. Tell me what you want."

"I want you," I panted, desperately wanting to feel the orgasm that rested just beneath the surface, begging to be set free. But I needed Price's cock to make that happen.

"Say it, Tessa. Say what you really feel."

“Fuck me!” I blurted out as a moan followed my command. “I want you to fuck me hard, and make me remember the feeling between my legs for days. Make me sting. Make me hurt. Fuck! Fuck me!” I was absolutely desperate at this point as his fingers hit a spot inside my pussy that had me gyrating uncontrollably. I needed more! I needed him so badly that I could have lost my mind in wild thirst for more if he didn’t mount me and take me right then.

Merciful as he was, he did just as I needed. Feeling his weight on top of me, I was soon rewarded when his cock pressed up against my opening, and easily slid in with the aid of my wetness. Wrapping my legs around him, I held on in fear that I would cede complete control over to the lust.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I was so hungry.

I had such a craving and an urge that only he could quench.

And with a forceful shove of his hips, he drove his thick cock all the way in, claiming me completely. Yes, yes, yes... I was his.

In and out he thrust, deeper and deeper with each pounding action. My moans blended with his as our bodies merged as one. He was my general in this war of lust, and my body would forever be his to command, to master, to lead toward completion.

“Fucking mine,” he growled as he powered into me, his muscles taut, his eyes glazed over. “Cry out for me, baby,” he groaned. “Cry, baby, cry.”

As if I needed the command, like a dutiful soldier, I did just as he ordered. A wave of warmth that had been resting on the cliff since he took my nipple into his mouth finally released. Pure carnality shook through my body as I cried out his name... crying in the only way I ever wanted to cry again.

Moaning with each pulsation of decadence that attacked my pussy, I truly melted into an abyss of sexual heaven. With a few more thrusts, Price added with his own pleasurable moans, and he too joined me in our own utopian paradise.

Slipping my arms around his neck, I pulled away enough to stare into his eyes. There was so much I wanted to say. So much I wanted to tell him. But right now, right this second, I enjoyed the silence.

“I need to get to work,” he said as he flung his legs over the bed.

My heart sank. I wanted more cuddle time. I wanted more of him. “It’s Sunday. Can’t you take one day off? Maybe we can go for a hike or something. I saw some snowshoes in the garage. I’ve never done that and—”

“I can’t,” he said, walking toward his closet. “I need to finish this ending. I’m a few days away from it if I stay focused.”

I didn’t like his answer. I hated his answer. But maybe if he knew how badly I wanted to go outside and play...

“Please? It’s sunny out. And you said a storm is coming soon, so shouldn’t we go out and enjoy the nice day while it lasts? We may be cooped up inside for a while.” I lowered the blanket to reveal a breast on full display to tempt him. “Price,” I said as he turned to look at me. “Come back to bed. Let’s play.”

It was completely unlike me to be so flirty and sexually open, but I was having fun with it. The man turned me into an animal at times.

Price looked away as if my tease did nothing. He pulled on his pants and pulled a sweatshirt on as if I wasn’t lying there naked in bed, willing and waiting.

“Price...”

“Tessa!” he snapped, walking toward the door. “I need to get to work. I’m sorry.” Without saying another word, or even walking over to the bed to give me a simple kiss goodbye, he left and headed to his office... again. Just like every single damn day since we arrived.

The pang in my heart from his hasty rejection quickly turned to anger. The anger

turned to rage. The rage turned to defiance.

All right, fucker! You don't want to go on a hike outside with me, then I will do it by myself!

Yanking my own clothes on in a fury, not paying attention to what I actually put on, I then stormed out to the main room. The man had hurt my ego, my feelings. I asked for one damn day off, and practically threw myself on him only to be cast aside for his damn book. That damn fucking book!

"Oh, good, you're up," Price said as he came out of his office with an empty coffee cup in hand. "What do you have in mind for breakfast? I'm starving."

Son of a bitch! Did he not even see that I was mad?

"Grab a bagel or something," I snapped. "I'm going snowshoeing before it starts snowing hard."

"What?"

"Did I stutter?" Okay, I was being a bitch, but I didn't care. My temper had blown and there was no pushing it back in once I got going on a rampage.

"What the fuck has gotten into you?" He took a few steps toward me. "And you are not going out in the woods alone. You know it's one of my rules."

"Yes, you and your rules," I said, rolling my eyes. "What Price says, goes. Yes, yes, I know. I know."

"I don't like how you are speaking or acting," he said with warning laced throughout every syllable.

“Well, I feel the same way. I don’t exactly like how you’re acting either,” I countered as I put my hands on my hips and took a step toward him as a predator would slowly stalk its prey.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“And how is that?” he asked, pausing as if he were genuinely baffled that I would be angry at all. “How exactly am I upsetting you? Because I said I had to work rather than hike?”

I didn’t say anything, but that was answer enough for him.

“I have to work. I have a book deadline looming. I explained how hard I worked and how often when I interviewed you and you accepted—”

“Yes, I know! When I accepted this job. But that was before...”

“Before what?” Price asked, acting much more calmly and in control than I was. “Just because we have sex, doesn’t mean I can stop and play with you all the time. You knew this. I’m not the man who can give you the attention you clearly need. I warned you.”

“All your warnings were before we had sex. Before something more happened between us. Before we had a relationship... unless I’m the only fool who actually thought we had a relationship.” My stomach coiled and I almost wanted to throw up. What if he didn’t think there was anything more between us and I had just shown my cards. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. But I’m due a day off, and I choose today. So, you have to go and get your own breakfast. I’m going out.”

Price stormed toward me and grabbed my arm firmly. “You are not going outside. So stop this nonsense before I take you over my knee and spank it right out of you.”

I snatched my arm away from him and took a few steps away. The pain in my gut

nearly suffocated me when I realized that he didn't even respond to my statement that something more had happened between us, nor did he say anything in regards to the relationship comment. It was what I feared. I was just a high-priced whore at his beck and call. That was what my job truly was.

"This isn't working out. I'm not your whore. I'm not yours to just fuck and spank whenever you damn well please."

"Tessa, take a deep breath and calm down."

I was out of control. I could feel it. But I didn't care anymore. My inner beast had been unleashed and she was wounded and bloody and wanted to flee.

"Don't tell me what to do. You can't tell me how to act, or what to say, or how to feel. You don't own me. I'm not yours! I want to leave."

"No."

"You can't just stand there and say no. I said I want to leave!" I shouted.

"And I said no." Price never raised his voice once.

"Fine!" I stormed toward the door. "Then I will change my hike to a walk. I'll walk into town and get home from there!"

"Do you realize how far it is?" he asked, almost mocking me.

"I don't care if it takes me all fucking day! Anything is better than staying in this house like a captive at your beck and call."

Without thinking, without looking back at Price, without grabbing a warm coat, or

gloves, or boots, my temper and I stormed out of the cabin. I didn't even have my pride.

Chapter Eleven

Price

I marched from one side of my office to the other in a frustrated fury. She'd gone against my wishes and refused to back down. Tessa. My sweet innocent and submissive Tessa. At least that's what she was before feelings had gotten involved. Before we changed our dynamic of employer and employee. Now... well, now... she was just plain infuriating. She was a seductive, sensual, and stubborn woman. Not just a girl I'd hired to help me. Not just a girl I was fucking. There were emotions there. Relationship-type emotions.

I stopped at the memory of spanking and fucking her so many times by the fire, and ground my teeth, a futile attempt to fight back the craving, the desire, the need... the love. The girl I had hired had become a woman... whom I wanted more than anything. I wanted her even more than writing the words on paper that consumed me.

I paced the room again, fighting the urge to hit something. Why did she want us so badly? Why in the hell would she throw caution to the wind and still want me—knowing who I was and how I acted? She had no idea how much effort it would take to make a relationship work—if it was even possible with a workaholic like me.

I didn't do relationships.

Fucked, yes.

Possessed, hell, yes.

Dominated, without a doubt.

But I did not do relationships.

Drawing my hands through my hair, I suddenly realized what it was that had me so upset.

She was hurt. I had hurt her, and her anger and outburst was due to that.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I stormed to the kitchen and grabbed a cup of cold coffee from earlier. Staring out the window, I sipped the sludge, wondering why I was so against the prospect of a future with her. If it were anyone else besides Tessa, would I just fuck her for now and have a good time? I knew the answer was yes. Why was I being such an ass and fighting her so hard on this? I wanted what she wanted too. And why the fuck had she left in a fit of rage because she didn't like what I was saying or doing?

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I was losing my damn mind, and I needed to get my shit together.

Enough was enough. Fuck history repeating itself by me getting too lost in my own demons. Once I cooled down and got control again, I was about to prove that my demons would not control me.

But for now, I was still fucking pissed.

Pissed at myself.

But regardless of that fact, I needed to go out and find Tessa before she got herself hurt or even killed. She had already been gone long enough, but no way could even be a quarter of the way to town yet. It was freezing outside and the irrational woman I was growing to care a lot about was out in the elements without even a coat. Grabbing my own coat, a gun for protection, and boots made for hiking in the snow, I prepared to hunt her down, I made a vow to stop blocking her out. I had to stop making the same mistakes. Yes, work was important and was my life. But unless I wanted to remain a lonely man forever, living in the mountain cabin like some hermit, I needed to fight for her. Tessa deserved all of me. Even if I wasn't exactly sure how to give it.

Rushing out the door, I knew it would be easy to track her down. Her little footprints were revealing the way. I pulled the collar of my woolen coat higher around my neck, trying my best to shield against the biting wind. Winter was bound to hold on longer than normal in the Sierras this year, keeping spring at bay. It wasn't something I minded, but cold nonetheless. My boots crunched against the snow as I maneuvered beneath the pinion pines, hanging heavy with the recent snowfall.

A scurrying to my right caught my attention. Reaching for my pistol, I inched my way toward the noise. I wouldn't consider myself much of a hunter, but rather preferred to buy my meat from the grocery store. But I had made sure I was capable of protecting myself if need be, especially being so deep in the woods.

The morning light reflecting off the snow lit my path as I scanned the area for any movement. My finger sat ready at the trigger, waiting for whatever caused the movement to show its face. It wasn't until I walked around a large pine, that I saw the source of the noise. Up against a cluster of trees sat a makeshift shelter composed of broken twigs and pine needles. In front of it, warming herself with a pathetic fire that barely crackled against the chilly air, sat my Tessa.

I wasn't exactly surprised to see her there. The walk into town would have been extremely far, and maybe the cold of the outdoors had cooled down that temper of hers. Watching her shiver against the cold in nothing more than a dress, thin black flats, and a sweater that was meant for sitting by a warm fire rather than in the dropping mountain temperatures, I wanted to both hold her tight and spank that ass of hers to teach her never to storm out of the house unprepared for the mountain.

The sound of my boots on the snow announced my presence, causing Tessa to jump up in fear. "Hello?" she called out, sounding much stronger than she appeared. Her tiny frame couldn't even fight off a jackrabbit, but I had a feeling she would give it her all if she was forced to defend herself. Her stance proved it; she stood ready for a fight.

Placing my pistol back in its holster, I stepped out of the shadows and made my way toward the fire. A fire I was surprised she even knew how to build. There was clearly so much about this woman I didn't know. Maybe she was a Girl Scout or something.

"I thought you were headed into town to go home." I watched as Tessa relaxed her body and unclenched her fists. Her big blue eyes scanned me from head to toe, but

she no longer appeared afraid.

“It was too far to walk alone right now, so I decided to stay warm by the fire until... well, I’m not sure until what. I haven’t thought it all through but needed to be warm while I did so.” She looked toward the fire, crossing her arms against her chest. “Then I will leave.” Her words didn’t have the same fury and strength they did in her fit of rage back at the house.

I didn’t know exactly what to say to this woman, but I knew she was in no condition to weather the elements, especially with a storm coming. “It’s freezing out here.”

Tessa squatted down to stoke the fire. “I’ll be fine. Don’t you worry about me. I’ve survived worse.” She didn’t look up as she spoke, seeming dismissive as if I had somehow invaded her space. Her nonchalance resembled a no-trespassing sign bigger than I’d ever seen.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Well, that’s just it.” I walked toward her and began unbuttoning my jacket. “I am worried. You aren’t dressed for the cold, and that fire you’ve got there isn’t going to keep you alive once the storm hits.” I removed my jacket and draped it over her shoulders, noticing how her body shook from the frigid air.

The simple gray dress she wore was so thin that I could almost see right through it. She might as well have been naked for how ill protected she was from the biting wind that gusted every so often. I half expected her to reject the coat, but she only pulled it shut tightly around her, self-preservation overriding pride.

She looked up into my eyes with a sincerity that melted any anger I still had toward her. “Thank you.”

I looked down at her feet. “Your shoes are completely soaked.”

She didn’t respond, but simply pulled the coat tighter around her throat. Her body still shook regardless of the jacket.

I wasn’t an impulsive man. Everything I did, I planned out from beginning to end. But staring at this young woman—half frozen to death—I knew I needed to act. “You’re coming with me.” I didn’t ask—maybe I should have—but words weren’t easy, especially as I fought back the urge to punish her for her foolish temper tantrum.

“I’ll be all right,” she said softly. “But I do thank you for the coat.”

“I’m not going to leave you out here. So go ahead and stop with this foolish act.”

“That shelter,” she turned her head to look at the pile of old wood that barely stood, “will be fine for now. At least until I get it all figured out what my next step is. Then I’ll be out of your hair.” She nodded and gave a weak smile. “I’ve camped before. Don’t you worry about me.”

I knew she was lying. She had never been camping a day in her life and even admitted so during our drive to the cabin. The easy thing would have been to agree, turn around and mind my own business. I hated games, and this clearly was one. She didn’t want me to leave her out here. Not deep down, and I damn well knew it. But today wasn’t going to be easy because this stubborn woman was coming back to the cabin with me whether she liked it or not. If I were to leave her here, I might as well shoot her between the eyes—the end result being the same.

“You’re coming home with me now. For good. No more talk of heading down the mountain.” Tessa opened her mouth to speak, but I stopped her by adding, “I told you the conditions of this job when you accepted it. So I don’t give a fuck how pissed off you are, you aren’t leaving. And I sure as hell am not going to allow you to spend the day out here and freeze to death.”

Tessa stood there a moment, looking as if she were pondering her options. The sky had started spitting out snow, and it was just a matter of time until her body would be drenched through and through. Her shelter wouldn’t have a chance holding up against the Sierra winds, and by the way she shook, even my coat wasn’t doing the job of keeping her warm.

I couldn’t help but release a small sigh of relief when a genuine smile spread across Tessa’s face. “I’m sure I look like a real idiot right now. My temper... I tend to not always think things through.” Tessa paused for a moment and then nodded. “I’ll go back. And I’m sorry for making you come out in search for me.”

“We’ll settle your debt later.” I walked over and began kicking snow into the fire to

extinguish it. Standing around and negotiating with this woman wasn't an option. White puffs of air came from my mouth, and my own body began to shiver without the warmth of my coat. I glanced down at her feet once more and then without giving it a second thought, swooped her body into my arms. "You aren't walking in the snow with those shoes."

She surprised me when she didn't offer up any resistance. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my neck and whispered, "Thank you."

"You won't be thanking me later," I mumbled.

"I can walk if you get too tired," she said in the softest of voices. It reminded me of a lullaby—soothing and calm. Something about her fragile nature made me want to handle her like fine china at times, but then break her at the same time.

"It isn't much further," I replied as we got closer to the cabin.

As Tessa and I emerged from the dense woods, my house came into view. The stream of smoke coming from the chimney made me pick up speed to be within the warm walls.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I stole a glance at Tessa, trying to not make it obvious. Her face stared blankly ahead looking... sad. The close proximity of having her in my arms made it awkward, and we both just traveled in silence. I wondered what was running through her mind, what were her thoughts, her fears.

Kicking the door open with my foot, I crossed the threshold with Tessa still in my arms. The heat of the cozy room washed over our frigid frames instantly. I quickly walked over to the rocking chair in the corner of the room and snatched the thick quilt that draped over it. I wrapped the blanket around Tessa's shoulders as I placed her down gingerly, not sure how her feet would feel.

"Thank you," Tessa said between chattering teeth.

"Stay by the fire until you warm up."

Tessa nodded as she placed her shaking hands in front of the fire.

I sat down on the wooden table chair, unlacing my snow-soaked boots. My toes stung, and I couldn't help but worry what poor Tessa's little feet felt like. She still stood before the fire, shaking more as the numbness wore off and no doubt the realization of truly how cold she was set in.

"Do you need anything?" I asked, worried about her, but not wanting to push too hard. I could still see her temper hadn't fully simmered down, and mine sure as hell hadn't.

"No," she said softly, not even looking my way.

“I’m going to go into my office for a little bit then.” Maybe it wasn’t the best thing. Maybe I should have doted on her, or even demanded an explanation. Maybe both. But for right now, I needed to hit the pause button and breathe and allow all the crazy, confusing emotions to dissipate a bit. And I figured she was in the same exact boat.

Chapter Twelve

Tessa

After finally feeling warm and dry, I marched toward his office with a heavy heart. I hadn’t meant to upset Price, and most likely I’d scared him. But I couldn’t give up on my dream with this man either. Not when he was the first person I truly felt passion for in a long time. Well, that... and this job. I really did love being his assistant as well.

I padded through the main room, my mouth dry. As I walked toward the door, I steadied myself for his anger. My knock was light, hesitant. I didn’t feel like I should just walk in like I had done so many times before. “Price?”

I waited, wringing my hands together as I struggled to catch my breath. I heard his heavy footsteps rap against the hardwood floors as he appeared in the doorway of his office.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve come to apologize for snapping at you the way I did. Regardless how I feel, I shouldn’t have spoken to you in that manner. I shouldn’t have stormed out without thinking and making you go out in the cold to find me.” The words came out colder and more formal than I had intended them to.

“Fine.” He spun around and stalked back into his office.

“Price! Wait!”

He slowed at the sound of my voice and peered over his shoulder. My heart fell to the pit of my stomach at the hurt I saw in his eyes.

“I tend to fuck things up in my life. I run really fast without thought. I didn’t exactly get the best guidance.” I paused and took a deep breath. “There is no one else I could imagine being with besides you. I need you,” I stated, unconsciously reaching out a hand, beckoning his touch. “I need whatever this is between us.”

He stared at my hand and then at my tear-filled eyes. His expression firm, unbreakable, then softly it melted. He turned so he faced me fully, his body taking up the entire space of the doorway.

I stood still, barely breathing, my hand still outstretched. “Please. I want this more than anything. But I don’t want it if I lose you by pushing too hard... or not hard enough. I need some guidance here. I need you to guide me.”

I turned to walk away, not wanting him to see me cry anymore. He grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled me close to him.

“Don’t leave,” he said. “We have some things to discuss, and to correct,” he added as both the tone in his voice and his eyes darkened.

* * *

Price

“There are consequences for your actions,” I said, never breaking eye contact.

“Maybe it’s time you really fire me,” she said, though I got a feeling she knew that wasn’t even an option. Hollow words.

“I had warned you that this wasn’t a normal job. It’s not black and white here. My rules don’t follow the ordinary path.” I walked over to a dining room chair in the main room and pulled it out from the table. “Come kneel on this chair. Ass out.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I could hear her gasp behind me. “I will not!” When I didn’t turn or say anything further, she added, “You can’t keep spanking me as a... as a consequence. No one does this!”

“I do this,” I said as I spun on my heels to face her. “I’m going to count to three with my fingers. For every count, and for every finger, that exact finger will be inserted inside of you.”

Her eyes opened wide, just as her mouth did. “What? Did you just say you plan to put your finger in me? In me how?”

“Your ass,” I said, trying not to smirk. Her shocked expressions amused me. She knew she was in trouble. She just didn’t truly know how much. Yet. “One finger, you can handle since we have already done that before. You may not have liked it exactly, but we know you can handle it just fine. Two will sting. I’m sure we don’t want to get to three. So I advise you to march to this chair as fast as you can.”

“Price... come on. This is going too far.”

“One,” I began as I held up my index finger.

I didn’t think her eyes could grow even bigger, but they did. She didn’t move, however.

“Two,” I continued as I brought up a second finger to join the first. My cock twitched against my pants as I pictured both of my fingers being shoved up her tiny asshole, spreading her wide as she pleaded for mercy.

She shook her head vehemently. “No way. This is not happening.”

“Three,” I added as a third finger joined the first two. “This is going to hurt.” I finally released the smirk that was threatening to break my cool bravado. “I didn’t know you were into fisting, Tessa. But that is exactly what this is going to become if you don’t come over here, kneel on this chair, and push your ass out like I originally asked.”

“Fisting!” she barely squeaked out. “I don’t even... this is insane. You can’t really expect to put three fingers in my ass.”

“It will be four in a second.”

“Okay, okay!” she snapped as she rushed to the chair. She shot daggers from her eyes as she positioned herself on the chair.

“Hold onto the back and push out your ass.”

A small whimper was her only response as she did exactly as I commanded. Yes, she knew she was in trouble, but this time, it was obvious she was getting a pretty good idea just how much.

“There are all sorts of spankings a naughty girl can receive. There is the sexy and fun kind that involves fucking. There is discipline for minor infractions or attitude adjustments, and there are true punishments. You running out in a fit of rage into the snow and having no idea where you were going warrants a true punishment. Like I said, there are consequences for your actions. It could have been you freezing to death out there alone tonight had I not found you. Lucky for you, your consequence is only my wrath instead of Mother Nature’s.”

Tessa flinched when my hand made contact with her covered bottom. Yes, she knew just how much trouble she was in. I could have punished her by making her

wait—enduring the agony of not really knowing what was next to come, but my cock ached to have her mouth wrapped tightly around it, so my own body and my own needs were rushing the torture along. I lifted up her dress and bunched it up at her lower back. I then lowered her panties to her upper thighs, exposing her to the warm air of the room. Regardless of the heated room from the fire, I could see chill bumps run along her flesh.

“Price, I told you why I ran. I also apologized,” Tessa began, but she never broke position. Her tight ass pushed out, just begging for my touch.

“Words,” I replied as I caressed her firm cheek with the palm of my hand. “All words which I prefer to be left in books. In real life, I prefer actions.” I accentuated my statement by raising my hand and then bringing it down hard on her upturned butt. The loud slapping sound of hand against skin was met with a mewl from her pouty lips.

Yes, Tessa knew exactly how much trouble she was in, because she didn’t budge from her pose even slightly. She was in the best display possible. Her pose had my dick so hard that I wasn’t sure if I would be able to take her to task. I wanted to fuck her bad.

Unbuckling my belt, I yanked the leather from around my waist. The jingle of metal from the buckle, and the swooshing of the thick leather through the air caused Tessa to quiver and her spine stiffen. She nearly broke her pose, but I swatted her again with my hand to remind her how a good girl should remain.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Are you going to use your belt on me?” she asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Is it going to hurt?”

“Most definitely.”

“Please, Price. No.”

“Beg all you want, Tessa. There is no getting out of this.” Not wanting to make her wait any longer, I brought the leather down upon her backside, enjoying how the snap of belt against flesh blended with the hiss of pain from Tessa’s lips. As I whipped her again, the hiss turned into a whimper, and the position was broken as she tried to cower away from what would be the next lash. “Back in position,” I directed firmly. I was pleased to see her stiffen her spine and push her ass out without hesitation.

I brought the belt down upon her ass over and over, watching it pinken as her whimpers turned to cries and little screams.

“Price, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please don’t spank me anymore. Please!”

Giving mercy wasn’t something I was prepared to do, but my hard cock against my pants had something else in mind. I wanted to be buried balls deep inside her so badly, that I needed to speed this process up or it would be me truly getting punished rather than her.

“Stay in position,” I said as I dropped the belt to the floor. “I’ll be right back, and I don’t want to see you’ve moved even an inch.”

I walked to my bedroom to go get a bottle of lube, knowing that she would be in the exact same position I’d left her. When I returned to the living room, I couldn’t help but smile as I watched Tessa kneeling on the chair with her pink ass on full display. My perfect toy for me to play with.

“Did the spanking hurt?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“Yes, sir,” she said in a pouty voice. I couldn’t see her face, but I could imagine her luscious lips pressed out and her blue eyes hazy with shame and embarrassment.

“Well, this is going to hurt even more,” I said as I walked up behind her and put the tip of my finger on her anus. “This is going to hurt bad.”

“Please,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said as I coated my fingers and her puckered opening with lubrication, “keep begging. You’re going to be doing a lot of that as I push not one but three fingers in this tiny little hole.”

The first finger slid in easily, and even though she gasped as I did so, I knew that her bottom hole was already willing to accept that level of invasion.

“One,” I said. I pumped my finger in and out of her as her gasp turned to little mewls. “I bet you wish you would have listened to me at just one.”

She nodded and hung her head in defeat. “Yes, sir.”

“But you didn’t,” I said as I pushed a second finger to join the first.

Tessa cried out and began to break position but then caught herself and remained with her ass pressed firmly out, giving me excellent access to her back hole.

As I began to slide the two fingers in and out of her, stretching her wide, she cried out. "It's too much. It hurts."

"It's meant to hurt. Punishments hurt."

"I can't take them. It's too much."

Her words were winded, and little moans were mixed within. I knew the two fingers were a lot for her tiny hole, but I also knew I had more plans than just having my fingers inside of her. My cock wanted a turn, and my dick was one demanding motherfucker.

"Two," I said as I continued to pump in and out of her, loving how her anus clenched around my fingers. I pictured it doing the same around my cock once I was plunging deep inside her.

It was time for the third finger. Yes, this was going to hurt, but I needed to remain firm in giving the discipline. I needed her to know that I was a man of my word. In the future, I was pretty sure she would be responding quickly and would do everything within her power to avoid the count of three.

"Three," I said as I squeezed a third finger into the hole as she released a loud cry.

"No. No," she panted. "It's too much. I can't take it."

"You are doing just fine," I said as I slowly slid all three past the extremely stretched opening. "You're opening up for me. This naughty hole of yours is being punished." I eased in deeper, my cock twitching as Tessa howled and thrust her head back, her

blonde hair cascading down her back.

“Price, please. Please. I will be good. I will never leave again.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that now,” I said with a light chuckle as I moved my fingers in and out. “I bet you wish you wouldn’t have been so stubborn now and not have had me reach the count of three.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“I’m sorry, sir,” she moaned. “It will never happen again. I swear.”

“I’m getting your hole nice and stretched,” I said. “I want it ready for the size of my cock. This ass is going to be mine.”

Tessa whimpered, but she didn’t object.

I pushed my three fingers inside of her and asked, “Is this hole ready for my cock? Or do you want me to keep stretching it?”

I knew I was being a sadistic bastard by asking the impossible question, but I didn’t care. And I loved her answer. “I want your cock, sir. I’m ready for you.”

“Say the words then,” I commanded as I kept my fingers planted firmly in her ass until she did.

“Fuck me in the ass, Mr. Anderson.” She cried out when I pushed my digits deeper inside. “Fuck me in the ass hard.”

“Go into my bedroom, get naked, and lie on the bed and wait for me. This punishment is about to get a hell of lot more intense.” I pulled out my fingers and swatted her hard on the ass. She squealed but didn’t hesitate at all. She practically ran to the bedroom, no doubt grateful my fingers weren’t stretching her anymore. Poor little girl. She had no idea how much worse my cock would be.

Price

My cock pressed against my pants to the point of pain. I couldn't free myself from the restraints of my clothing fast enough. This woman... this goddess before me literally made me grow weak in the knees. Such sweet delicate features, and also such luscious and alluring curves. I had to have her. I had to have her now, and I prayed to God that I could be gentle since I had already been firm and truly pushed her boundaries.

Shedding the last of my clothes, I approached the bed and ran my palm up Tessa's leg, enjoying the fact that she didn't flinch, but moaned in response to my touch. She lay back on the bed completely naked, and didn't try to conceal herself at all. Her eyes never left mine, as if she were attempting to hypnotize me with her seductive and needy stare.

"I want to look at and touch every part of your body. I want to memorize every curve, every dip and valley, and every inch of your skin."

Without waiting for a response, I spread her legs wide, watching the seam of her pussy open for me. Beneath her pussy, I could see her anus, so small... so tight. Her tiny hole just begging to be entered, but I knew I needed to go slow.

Running my finger along the puckered and delicate flesh, I asked, "Has anyone ever touched you here before besides me? Has anyone fucked this ass of yours?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Then we need to get you ready. I don't want to hurt you." I said the words as I walked over to the bedside table and pulled out a bottle of lubrication.

Returning to the bed, and back to Tessa, I could barely contain my hunger to be

buried so deep inside of her. Soaking up her juices glistening on her pussy with my fingertip, I coated the opening to her anus nice and good with the added lubrication. With as much care as I could, I pressed my wet finger past her opening and eased my way in. Tessa gasped and tensed, but then relaxed when I slowly began to move my finger in and out of her tight channel. I leaned down between her legs and kissed her smooth mound, inhaling the musky scent of her desire.

“It’s tender,” she whispered. “From before.”

“Relax, Tessa,” I coaxed as my finger glided in and out. “I need to get this sweet ass of yours ready for me. I’m not a small man, and I don’t want this to hurt more than it already will.” When her legs relaxed back open and her hips thrust up to meet my mouth, silently begging for more of my kisses, I whispered, “That’s my good girl. Let me prepare you to become my perfect and most cherished woman in all ways.”

My name caught in her throat when a moan overpowered it as my tongue flicked her clit, nipping it between my lips. Her hands ran down both sides of my head, driving my face into her pussy as her moans intensified.

“Price... Price? This feeling. I feel...” Panic laced her words.

“Allow it to come. It’s your body allowing the taboo to take over. Forbidden pleasure. Let it in.”

Her head thrashed side to side, and her breathing became ragged. “I’m scared. It feels wrong to feel this good while your finger is inside my ass.”

“Come for me, Tessa. Fill my mouth with your sweet cream. Release and let go of all those restrictions holding you back. Let that orgasm rock the inner walls of your ass just as much as your pussy.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Her hips bucked as her moan turned into a tiny scream. Her pussy quivered around my mouth, and the taste of her release coated my tongue. I lapped up every last bit of her completion as her body shook on the tail end of her climax.

Not wanting her to fully become sated, I moved up to her breasts and began to circle my tongue around one nipple, and then moved to pay the same attention to the other. Molding the flesh of her firm and perky mounds with my hands, I could no longer fight the hunger. I needed my cock buried deep inside of her ass and couldn't wait any longer.

I placed my lips at the shell of her ear and growled, "I'm going to fuck you in the ass now. It is going to hurt, Tessa. It's going to hurt bad, but also hurt so, so good."

"Yes, yes, please," she begged. "I want this. I do."

Placing the head of my dick at her back entrance, I slowly eased in, pausing when I felt her body tense with resistance. I knew this was the time where I fully claimed her. Her anal virginity would belong to me, just as she would.

Forever mine. Mine on the mountain.

Forever to play with as I choose.

"Take a deep breath and relax," I ordered as I pushed firmly against the tightly closed puckered flesh as Tessa cried out. "Shhh..." I cooed as I paused for a moment so she could adjust to my girth and to the sensation of being stretched. "I know this hurts."

“I think you’re too big. I don’t think I can take all of you.” Her eyes were wide, and her voice quivered as she said the words.

“Yes, you can. You will take all of me. You have no other choice.”

Wanting to be gentle was one thing. Actually being able to was another. Gentle and sweet when it came to fucking and claiming what was mine just wasn’t in my nature.

Raw, hard, aggressive was who I was.

I launched a steady rhythm of pushing in and out, only being fueled by her soft little mewls. A steady staccato of my cock pulling out just enough to spread her opening even wider, and then plummeting back inside, so deep I could feel the walls of her ass constricting around me. In and out, I claimed her in one of the most animalistic and taboo of ways. In and out, she gave herself to me. Mine.

Not being able to hold back my own pleasure any longer, I allowed the surge of my ecstasy to take over, filling my seed deep within her tiny hole.

“Price,” she called out, the sound so sweet on her pouty lips.

“Yes?”

“Will you ever let me go?”

“Never. Never. You are mine and I am one stingy son of a bitch.”

Chapter Fourteen

Tessa

I'm not exactly sure why I was even thinking of my mother. I had spent most of my adult life trying to forget about her and just live my life as normally as I could, but I woke up with her on my mind. I had been up in the cabin for a long time, and I realized I had never even told her I was leaving San Francisco. It didn't really matter, since she didn't even know where in San Francisco I lived, but for some reason today I felt a little guilty for not at least saying goodbye and telling her where I was at. What if something did happen to me? She wouldn't even know. Price wouldn't even know how to contact her or even that he should. I had told the man next to nothing about me, my past, and definitely nothing about my mother. It was something I just wanted to not discuss and move on. Out of sight, out of mind, and saving my sanity.

But today was different.

Guilt was winning.

"Price," I said softly, hating to disturb him as he wrote. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Yes, what?" he asked, not looking up from his computer and continuing to type. He had a skill of being able to still write as he spoke to me as long as it was short and sweet.

"Do you mind if I use the phone to call my mother?"

He paused typing and looked up. "Call your mother? Of course. Why?"

"I haven't touched base with her in a long time, and for some reason I feel I should." Maybe it was a little bit of cabin fever and boredom. Maybe I needed to hear another voice besides Price's. "I don't have a cell phone though." Shame filled me as I said those words. Who in today's age didn't have a cell phone? Until I was getting weekly deposits put into my bank account by Price, I never had enough money to pay for a phone.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Sure,” he said, as he reached for his phone and then gave it to me. “It gets the best signal in the main room, but it works great from my desk too. Do you want me to leave to give you some privacy?”

“Oh, no,” I said, jolting toward the door. “I’ll go in the main room. Thank you.” The thank you was also for him not judging me. I never once felt like he did or even questioned me as to why I didn’t have a cell phone like every other person in the world seemed to have.

I dialed the phone as soon as I left his office, not sure if I was making the right decision, and also not sure if I even had the right number.

“Hello,” came the familiar voice on the other end.

“Mom, it’s me.”

“Tessa. Wow, long time no call. Your mother could have been dead, you know.” Her words were slurred, and it didn’t take me more than a second to know she was shit-faced drunk.

Rolling my eyes and trying to ignore the guilt trip, I continued on. “I’ve been busy. I have a really good job as an assistant to a famous author. It pays really good, and I am on location in the Sierra Mountains as he writes his next book.”

“Well, look at you all hot shot. So now are you too good for your mother?”

Again, I tried to ignore the poke. She wanted to fight. She always wanted to fight

when she was drunk. I should know better and know what happens whenever she drinks. I could feel it, and she was doing her best at pushing my buttons to trigger my temper. “Well, I just thought I would let you know where I was and what I was doing.” I took a deep breath. “How are you?”

“Poor, sick, and alone. My only daughter doesn’t even care.”

“Mom...”

“Don’t worry about me. You just live your fancy life and ignore where you came from.”

“I didn’t call to fight,” I began.

“Then what? To rub it in that you’re living life with the famous author. Was that supposed to make me feel good?”

“I was hoping you would be proud of me,” I snapped. “Maybe be a fucking mother for once and praise me for landing a really good gig. Instead, you are—never mind. Seriously. I don’t know why I bothered.”

“I don’t know why you bothered either,” was her reply. “But since you’re on the phone, why don’t you send me some of that money and help your mother out.”

“I’m not going to give you money, Mom. You’ll just drink it away anyway.” I was surprised at my own strength. Normally, her guilt trips and sour attitude would have crumbled my walls and I would have given my last cent to her. But this time was different. I don’t know why it was, but it was.

“Well, then fuck you then!” she shouted, barely getting the words out through her stupor. “I don’t need you anyway. Go live your life and don’t call me again.”

“Mom,” I started, trying to stop the fight. Maybe I should just give her the money.

“You can’t be who you aren’t, little girl. You might think I’m white trash and you’re too good for me. But my poor blood runs through your veins. You are trash too. Just remember that. Always will be.”

I hung up the phone, vowing to never go down this road again.

Fuck. She was a cruel bitch. But still... fuck.

Going outside, I settled in a big Adirondack chair on the front porch and wiped away my tears. The heated conversation with my mother had left me feeling alone, vulnerable, and just plain exhausted. I shouldn’t have called. I knew better, and I knew she would ask for money the minute she found out where I was and what I was doing. But for some crazy reason, I had felt the need to at least let her know where I was. Love had made me soft and forgiving, I suppose. But when would I ever learn?

Behind me, I heard the screen on the front door open.

“How did the phone call go? Did you get clear enough service?” Price came out onto the porch, a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. “It’s time you and I—” He paused when he saw my tears. “What’s wrong?”

I opened my mouth to speak and could only cry more.

“Tessa?” He set down everything he’d been carrying and came closer.

“I’m fine. Just moody is all.” I quickly stood up and walked toward the door. “Just give me a second to push family drama out of my mind so we can enjoy the evening.” I tried my best to give a weak smile.

Emerging from the bathroom after drying my tears and calming my nerves, I found Price standing by the living room window, lost in his own thoughts. I knew he would be concerned about me crying, but hoped I could divert him with a long, seductive kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“You’re trying to distract me,” Price said, his mouth descending on mine even though his body remained stiff.

“Guilty,” I confessed, pressing my body to his. It didn’t take much to spark the need within me. I wanted him. Every nerve ending in my body craved him.

“What got you so upset?” he asked.

“Nothing important,” I murmured, moving my lips to his earlobe, down the curve of his neck, licking across his collarbone.

“We need to talk. Now,” he demanded.

“Okay,” I said, sighing deeply. “What would you like to talk about?”

Price leaned forward, his firm hands braced on each of my arms, pinning them to my sides. With his face inches from mine, my heart seized.

“Tessa, do you trust me?”

“Yes. Why would you ask that?”

“Then why do you shut me out? Why don’t you ever talk about you and your past? Other than our interview, you haven’t given me any information about your life before we came to the cabin.”

“I trust you...” Each word seemed to be a struggle. My lungs squeezed inside my

chest. “The past is the past. Mine is just some cheesy country song that doesn’t need to be sung,” I added, trying to lighten the mood with a weak joke.

“So I allow you to shut me out?” he asked, anger simmering through his words.

“No, not at all. I don’t shut you out. I tell you everything.”

“Tessa, stop. This has been an ongoing problem with us. Whenever you’re truly upset or have something on your mind, you back away from me. Then it builds up and you snap like when you charged out of the house. I don’t understand why you can’t even answer simple questions like how your conversation with your mother went.” He glared into my eyes. “What’s going on with you?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but couldn’t find anything worthy to say. Price cursed and turned his back toward me. The action was so unfamiliar, so foreign from how controlled and collected Price usually behaved, that I just stood dumbfounded.

“I don’t know what I can do or say to change this. I feel like I’ve done everything within my power to reassure you that there’s nothing you can’t confide in me about. I feel like I’m losing this battle.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “But I sure as hell won’t lose without a fight!”

“Price? Why are you acting this way?”

“Because I’m trying to make sense of this relationship. I’m trying to make it work, but I need you to as well. Which means communication and getting to know each other. I’m sick and tired of this distance between us unless we’re in bed together. A lot of it is my fault too. But we have to have real conversations sometimes. We can’t just fuck and live in this little fantasy cabin world. I don’t like games, Tessa. I fucking detest them. So when I ask a question, I think I’m owed an answer and not a fake smile instead. We aren’t going to last if we can’t be open with each other. And I

fucking care way too much to not see this last.”

I was dizzy, nearly blind with fear. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Price this angry. He'd never actually yelled at me before. Never. He was composed to a fault at times.

Watching Price's fury and his visible pain, I couldn't understand why I couldn't just spill my guts. Fear paralyzed me with the thought that I was about to lose him. I was going to lose it all. The overwhelming weight of everything almost seemed too much to take. But who in the hell wanted to hear about my white trash life? Who would want to welcome that into his life?

“We're supposed to be celebrating your book,” I pointed out, my voice strained as I struggled to remain calm with Price's glare sparking a heat infusing my neck and face. “Let's not discuss this anymore.”

“I'm going to ask you one more time. What got you so upset? I want a real answer, young lady.”

The way he said ‘young lady’ sent a chill down my spine. I knew I was treading on dangerous water now. Rarely did he use that tone, and when he did, it usually led to a punishment. I was walking into trouble.

“I did give you a real answer,” I insisted. “It really isn't anything that needs to be discussed right now. How about that wine? Would you like me to pour us some?”

His eyes narrowed, and without responding to my question, he asked, “Would you rather I spank you? Not the kind of spanking you've been craving, but a real spanking. One you haven't had ever. Do I need to punish you because you absolutely refuse to open up to me?” When I remained silent, Price growled, “I want you to go into the bedroom and get undressed. Find a corner and go stand in it.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

I stood in silence for a moment. “What? You want me to go stand in the corner?”

“Now.”

I winced at his sharp and direct order.

“You’ve never made me stand in the corner before. That’s not what we do,” I challenged.

“I said, now.” Price’s brows dipped further in warning.

“I don’t want to. Can’t you just spank me right now? I don’t know how... I mean, I don’t want to stand in the corner,” I said softly. It felt... silly and childish. Or was it vulnerable and uncomfortable?

“I’m angry right now. I need a moment to calm down.”

I lifted my brows and tried to come up with the right words to say.

“So, go get undressed, stand in the corner, and wait for me. I mean it, Tessa.”

His tone and the look on his face made it very clear that I better do just as he asked. I hated seeing him this way. The fury mixed with pain was almost too much to bear. All I had to do was talk to him. Share my feelings with him. He wasn’t asking for much and yet...

“Okay.” My voice was a whisper, and my eyes filled with tears as I turned

shamefully away to do just as he ordered.

Chapter Fifteen

Tessa

My mind spun, trying to make sense of what he was making me do. He'd sounded frustrated as he'd ordered me away. I didn't like the idea of standing in the corner like an errant child. Hated it, in fact. Walking away, alone, made me feel absolutely awful. It hurt to think that Price was too angry with me to deal with the discipline right then and there. I would much rather feel the burn of his hand against my ass, than the cold of walking to the room by myself.

Blinking back tears, I went to the bedroom and walked to the empty corner on the right side of the bed. With my fingers trembling, I removed each item of clothing until I stood completely nude. Taking a few steps closer to the corner, I stood there with my face only inches from the wall.

My heart thumped strong and steady. I stood in the corner, staring at every inch of the wall up close. I stood there. Silence. An endless torturing circle of thoughts punished me more than the worst spanking implement. Tears rose in my eyes as I tried to make sense of my stubborn refusal to just be honest with Price. Why? Why couldn't I just tell him about the nightmares of my life and how my mother had played a part in them?

I needed his advice and his shoulder to lean on. Instead, I shut him down and backed away from his affection and concern. I made it worse by trying to brush it off as if it were nothing. He kept trying, and I kept shutting down, over and over, until he finally sent me away to be punished alone. Standing in the corner was by far the worst punishment yet. Remaining in place with my nose in the corner was far beyond anything I could imagine. The waiting was excruciating. Alone, naked, chills running

along my skin left me desperate for Price's touch—no matter how harsh it could be. My body shook and my sex throbbed with anticipation. The unknown racked my nerves, and my imagination ran wild with what would happen next. Feelings of embarrassment, shame, and humiliation, mixed with sexual desire and lust, made my knees wobble.

Standing in the corner made me face my thoughts and stare directly at the demons that tormented me. It forced me to deal with my emotions. I had no choice when there was nothing standing in the way. There was nothing to distract me, nothing to hide behind. Naked and out in the open, I had no choice but to think and come to terms with my feelings.

The responsibility of being trusted with so much love had scared me to death. I'd never gotten anything right when it came to love, so I kept up a wall of protection. My fear had caused me to keep Price at bay. As long as things were perfect, then I could give myself to him fully. But if things went bad, I felt the need to hide and shut down. I needed to stop. I needed to trust in Price, and trust that he truly would stand there in not only the good times, but the bad times, too.

I hated being alone with my thoughts, but loved the feeling of standing there exposed and ready for whatever Price had in store. I resisted the urge to move and waited for Price to do with me as he pleased. A submissive wave washed over me as my core melted in hungry need. I stood there, punished, remorseful, and wanting to change. I waited in the corner, willing... willing to trust a man who controlled every part of me.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Here it came.

I stood stiff, staring at the corner. Behind me, the bedroom door had opened, and Price had come into the room. His footsteps were heavy behind me. I tried very hard to calm my racing heart with little success. My cheeks flushed with the embarrassment of knowing he was watching me stand naked against the wall. I pressed my legs firmly together to try to conceal the moisture that had been building during my isolated discipline. Feeling more vulnerable than I ever had before, I just closed my eyes and waited.

“Tessa.” His hand glided up my back, tangled in my hair, and then slowly slid its way down to rest on the curve of my ass. My breath caught, waiting for what was next.

Price turned me toward him and kissed me softly on the cheek. He let me go and settled himself on the edge of the bed. He took a moment to look at my naked body standing before him, before tapping the top of his thighs. “Come lie over my lap.”

I searched his eyes, and the intensity of his gaze made my heart skip a beat. I wasn’t going to protest or put up the slightest fight. I wanted this spanking both physically and emotionally. I needed Price to take control. I needed him to demand control.

With one fluid movement, I silently placed my body over his knee.

“This is going to be a real punishment spanking. It’s going to hurt,” Price said in a low voice.

I nodded. “I know.”

“This won’t be easy for me to do, but I have to.”

I swallowed. “I know.”

He grabbed my hands and held them in place at my lower back with one of his. This was not a good sign. He expected me to try to resist. It was the true sign that one hell of a session was coming.

The spanking began as he swatted every inch of my upturned bottom. He spanked harder, turning my heavy sighs and soft cries into an outright sob. I had never really cried uncontrollably during a spanking, until now. Yet, I didn’t beg or plead for him to stop, because I didn’t want him to.

By the time he reached the soft skin of my inner thighs, the intensity of the spanking was almost too much. I twisted and turned against his hand, trying to avoid the slaps. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt pain like this. Pain I couldn’t stop even as I tried.

“You shutting me out”—he spanked me five more times even harder—“is going to stop.”

I nodded. “Yes, yes! I promise.”

“When I ask you to tell me what is going on, I expect an answer.” The spanking continued on.

I nodded frantically again since words failed me. The sobs shook my body as his hand landed on my sensitive sit spots. Over and over the swats rained down, each one with more force than the last. I wiggled, I writhed, I resisted in any way I could, but nothing stopped the punishment.

“Please! It hurts!”

“Are you going to tell me what was wrong? Or do we need to continue on?”

“I’m sorry, Price. I know I should have been open with you. I don’t know why I wasn’t.”

Price released my hands, allowing me to wipe away my tears.

“So I’m going to ask you again.” He rubbed my backside, running his fingers down, following the path of the crease toward my anus. I moaned and parted my legs, allowing him access to the rest of me. He slid his finger past my silken folds, wet with my hunger for more, and pressed deeply within. He removed his finger and pressed against my tight back entrance. Pressing as he spoke, he asked, “What had you so upset?”

Price’s finger entered my anus effortlessly, releasing a wanting gasp from me that I couldn’t hold back. I craved more from him like never before. I bucked against his hand, driving his finger even deeper into my forbidden channel.

“Tessa,” he warned. “I don’t want to spank you again.”

I turned my head and looked over my shoulder at him. “My mother... she asked for money. And she just... upset me like only she has a way of doing.”

He quickly wrapped his arms around me, pulling me tightly into his embrace, cradling me as he spoke. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He placed soft kisses on my forehead as I snuggled against his chest. Price brushed the hair away from my face. “What happened? Why?”

“Because it’s what she does. She uses me. She only thinks of herself. And she has a

way of making me feel absolutely worthless and just as bad as her. Just when I feel I am climbing out of the dark pit of despair she has always kept me in, she claws me right back in.”

“You’re not worthless. Far from it. You are my most prized possession. Mine.” Price held me tight, rubbing his hands softly along my back.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

“Not in her eyes,” I sniffled. “And because of her, not in my own eyes.” I couldn’t hold back any longer and allowed the tears to come flowing out again. “I hate her! I know a daughter should never say that about her own mother. But my entire life, I’ve been giving and giving, and I’ve got nothing left to give. I’m unhappy. No, I’m miserable when it comes to her.” I looked up into his eyes. “It’s why I came here with you. I wanted to run as far away from her toxicity as I could.”

He shook his head slowly. “I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me? Why such a secret?”

“I didn’t want to bother you with my problems. And I didn’t want you to see me as broken and damaged. I didn’t want to be a defective toy you would want to return.”

“I should pull you over my knee and spank you again for saying something like that.” He softly kissed my lips. “Your problems are mine, too. If you are mine—which you are—then your demons are mine to fight.”

I turned my head to look up into Price’s eyes. “I’ve never had anyone say that before.”

“I protect what’s mine.”

“Yes, but...” I shook my head. “I don’t want you to see my past. Only my future. I don’t even want to face it. I like the picture you have painted for me. Shiny and new.”

Price took my hands, linking our fingers together. “Your happiness is my number one concern. I’m not okay with you facing anything that upsets you alone. I expect you to

lean on me and have me fight the monsters away. I definitely don't want you dealing with your mother alone anymore." He lifted my hands, brushed his lips over the back of each one in turn, causing a small tremble to rack my naked body. "We don't have to make any decisions in regards to how we handle your mother and your past right now. Just know that this is a decision that we'll be making together. You aren't alone anymore. You are mine now. And nothing, and no one can harm you."

"You won't think less of me? Think I will become my mother or be like her?"

"Never," he said. He kissed my head. "Lie down so I can cover you up. You're shaking. We can talk about this in bed."

I lifted my chin. "Can't we just not discuss it at all? I'd rather not think about it anymore."

"That's not an option. We're going to deal with it without any protest from you," he warned me.

"Why?" I asked with a heavy sigh.

"Because I care about you. We're going to make everything right, and talking about your past is part of that." Price positioned our bodies on the bed, spooning my curves against his.

I pressed my hot ass against his growing cock. "I know... you're right. I just need to feel you right now. I need you inside me. I promise that we can discuss this later. Please, Price." I moaned as I pressed against him even harder.

* * *

Price

I knew that Tessa had a lot on her mind right now, but she didn't turn away when my mouth lowered toward her.

Our lips touched, a fleeting hint of what was yet to come. I pressed her close, then closer still, so that the soft curves of her body melded to the hardness of my cock. I kissed her again, as her arms lifted to encircle my neck. Our kiss intensified, leaving our bodies tense for more.

I wanted to approach things slowly, to not let my desire be mastered by my passion. But when Tessa moaned against the thrust of my tongue and her hands frantically removed all of my clothing, I knew the battle was lost.

The level of chemistry between us after a spanking had always been consuming, making me want her with an intensity that I'd never experienced with anyone else. When she laid her nude body over my lap to accept her discipline, my body almost exploded with lust.

She always wanted to be taken after a spanking. Her physical response left me no doubt about that fact. Sensual, erotic, and tantalizing sex always followed suit. Passion was always mixed with punishment. It was what and who we were becoming.

She rubbed herself intimately against me, the action making my cock grow even harder. I wanted to sink into her, to lose myself in her slick, wet heat, to drive us both hard and fast to orgasm. I couldn't wait to hear her scream out my name.

It was what we both wanted—more important, what we needed. But this time, I was determined to give her something different, to offer her something more. Not just a sexual experience, but a promise. I wanted to communicate security in the way we made love. I wanted to make sure she felt safe in the fact that I was there. I was going to shelter her from any storm that came her way.

Chapter Sixteen

Tessa

I knew this day would come. Six months, one week, four days, and it was finally here. The day we would have to leave the cabin. But I didn't expect how sad it would truly make me. Price and I hadn't really spoken about what would happen next. What it would mean for me as a job, and what it would mean for me and Price and what had formed between us. We wouldn't be living together anymore. That much I knew, and that alone made me really sad. I couldn't imagine not seeing him every day, and not being with him. And where would I go? I had no place to go back to, though I had a nice chunk of change after being paid for my time in the mountains to find someplace new, I still wasn't thrilled with the idea. But I didn't want to be that girl. The clingy girl who thinks there is more than there really is. There definitely was something between Price and me. I wasn't going to deny that, nor did I think he would. But what happened next, I had no idea. And I didn't have the balls to ask him or even bring it up. I kept waiting for him to, and the wait alone was agony.

I walked into his office with his morning coffee in hand. He was on the phone with someone I assumed was his editor since that was the only person he ever spoke to.

"Yes, I sent over the master document fully completed this morning," he said as he smiled at me as I walked in.

I brought the coffee to his desk and turned to leave, but Price pulled me down onto his lap instead.

“Yeah, we’re going to head back today, and yes, I can make Los Angeles happen if you think that the deal is actually going to fly. I don’t want to waste my time otherwise.” Price paused as I could hear Brett’s muffled voice speaking on the other end. “Fine by me. Go ahead and make the arrangements and text me the details. I’ll have Tessa book me a flight and hotel.” Price hung up the phone and kissed me firmly on the mouth. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I answered with my eyes still closed as I slowly pulled away from the kiss. A girl could get used to spending her mornings greeted this way.

“That was Brett. I guess a studio is interested in turning my book from last year into a movie.”

“That’s fantastic news,” I said, still not wanting to get off his lap. Never wanting to get off his lap. “I guess I better get busy.”

He tugged my wrist toward him, giving me no choice but to stumble up against his chest.

“Kiss me,” he ordered in a gruff whisper.

I followed his direction gladly. I wanted nothing more than to feel his lips against mine.

“Remove your clothes,” he ordered again.

Without hesitation, something I remembered he appreciated—immediate compliance—I stood back and with as much grace as I could muster, removed each item as seductively as I could. It was a dance I was performing for my audience of one.

Price sat back on his desk and crossed his arms against his chest, clearly enjoying the display.

“Stand naked before me,” he commanded once all my clothes were removed.

I did so without protest.

“Spin, and allow me to see that ass of yours.”

I did as he asked, turning my back to him.

“Bend over so I can see you on full display.”

I paused for a moment, but did as he asked. “Your demands are dark and twisted.”

“You have no idea how true that statement is. Spread your cheeks for me. I want to see the bottom hole that I plan to claim again and again,” he ordered.

My heart skipped, but I reached behind me and pulled apart the fleshy mounds of my ass. The cool air of the room invading the most intimate of spots sent shivers down my spine. He said nothing for seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime. I remained in position, almost feeling his stare. The juices that had formed between my lips were also on display, and I was sure he could indeed see that fact. I could smell my scent of need and wondered if he could smell me as well as see exactly what his authoritative words did to me.

I heard the motion of him getting off the desk. I remained in position, determined to stay that way until he gave the command to move. I could hear him rummaging through a drawer and fought the temptation to glance over.

I jumped slightly when I felt his palm on my ass. “Keep them spread,” he directed. A

cold liquid touched my anus, and I tensed and nearly let go of my cheeks. “I want to take you here. I want my cock buried in the depth of your ass again.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

My heart beat so hard, I could feel the pulse in my temples. I swallowed back the lump in my throat, trying not to jerk up and run out of the office. Panic mixed with a forbidden desire to have him do just as he pleased rumbled within me. I liked it last time. In fact, I had loved it. But it still made me nervous.

He continued to spread the lubrication all around my anus and pressed it past the puckered hole with his finger. He coated every inch of my hole, preparing it for entry.

He moved me to the edge of the desk and pressed me down to lie on my stomach against the cool surface. “Have you fantasized about me taking your ass again?”

I nodded, realizing that subconsciously I must have. The idea of anal sex had always been off limits with anyone else before, and yet, here I was with Price, excited... craving it more than once.

“I will be gentle, but it will take some time for you to adjust. Just because it happened once, doesn’t mean you will get used to the bite. I need you to trust me, relax with my touch, and completely give me your submission.”

“Is it going to hurt just as bad as last time?” I asked in my most innocent voice. I was enjoying this little game. I wanted his cock buried in my ass again more than anything, and I knew he wanted the same. But the innocent, anal virgin game was fun.

“You know it will. Just the way you like it, baby.”

I nodded. I couldn’t have said anything more if I tried. My breathing came in ragged

pants, and my body hummed with a sensation I had never known.

He lowered himself over my back and began to softly kiss the side of my neck, my shoulder, my earlobe—each kiss sending tingles to my throbbing pussy. His cock pressed against the crease of my butt.

“I’m scared,” I lied. The only thing I was truly scared of was him stopping.

“I’ll take care of you. Just breathe and trust me.”

“I’m scared it will hurt too much,” I admitted.

“You’ll feel a bite of pain as my cock enters you. But as your little hole relaxes, it will allow me better entrance. You just have to relax the best you can.” He kissed my neck and nibbled my ear. “But the pleasure I give you will be worth the little bit of pain.”

He reached down with his hand and guided his cock to my tight back entrance. Very slowly, and with so much control, he pressed the tip of his dick past the tight ring. He paused so I could get used to the initial shock.

“Relax. Open yourself to me,” he purred in my ear, following the words with soft kisses to my neck.

He pushed further, causing me to gasp. The bite, the stretch, the erotic feeling, all became too much. I shook my head. “You’re too big for me. I think I’ll tear.”

Price whispered in my ear, “You’ve thought that before, and you took me just fine. Might have hurt, but hurt so fucking good. Take a deep breath.” I did as he asked. “Take another one, and relax your muscles. You need to trust that once I am fully inside you, it will feel good. Submit your fear, your tension, and your body to me.”

He reached a hand around my front and found my clit. He circled his finger around, causing me to moan in delight. I focused my attention on the arousal his finger gave me and was able to ease the muscles of my anus. Doing so allowed his cock to press completely into my ass.

“That’s it, baby,” he praised as he slowly pumped his length in and out. “Let me claim that ass of yours. Let me make you mine.”

My bottom hole stretched to impossible levels, but my body heightened with each move of his cock. It was a different type of pleasure than with my pussy, but it was still pleasure.

Having Price’s cock fill my ass and pump in and out gave me a sense of belonging. At that very moment, I was his. I had given myself completely.

“I want to come in your ass,” he moaned.

“Yes, yes!”

His gentle thrusts became a little more aggressive. Each push went slightly deeper than before. Tingles in my ass became sparks of ecstasy. My dark channel pulsed around his cock, and I screamed out his name.

My sound of pleasure brought on a few more driving thrusts, and Price ended the fucking with a roar. I could feel his shooting seed fill my hole.

We rested on the desk for quite some time. I listened to his deep breaths as I gathered my own.

“So as soon as we get back to San Francisco, I’ll need you to make the arrangements for me to go down there and meet them in person.” Price’s words were like cold

water being poured on me.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

My heart sank. I wasn't sure if it was because he spoke of going back to San Francisco without even mentioning what that would mean for us, or the fact that I desperately wanted him to say that we were going to Los Angeles, and to book our flights.

"Okay," I said softly, trying to not make it obvious how disappointed I was. "What time did you want to leave today?"

"Let me finish responding to these emails. If you don't mind packing up and shutting down the house, I'll join you as soon as I get done. Then we can head out and get on the road. We can be home before it's dark."

Home. I didn't have a home. But I guess that wasn't an issue for Price. Nor should it be. My shit shouldn't have to become his shit just because we fucked.

I got off his lap, picked up my clothes, and walked toward the door feeling like my entire life was crumbling around me. I didn't want to cry, or at least not in front of him, so I decided it best to exit before the waterworks began.

Chapter Seventeen

Price

Tessa hadn't said more than a couple of words the entire drive back to the city. She stared out the window and was clearly lost in thought. And to be fair, I was pretty zoned out myself. I was trying to really think out the movie deal offer and prepare myself for the upcoming meeting, but after an hour of complete silence, I decided it

was time to check in.

“You all right over there?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she answered, but she didn’t look away from the passing scenery.

“Awfully quiet.”

“Yeah.”

I reached across the seat and took her hand in mine. “Are you sad about leaving the cabin? I always am.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess that means I better get started on my next book right after this movie deal stuff is over with and the launch of this current book. The mountain always calls to me, and it’s great seeing that it will have the same effect on you.”

She shrugged, but still hadn’t looked away from the window, and her hand laid limply in mine. Something was clearly wrong.

“Tessa, what’s going on? What’s on your mind?”

“Just thinking, I guess.”

“Okay... care to tell me about what?” I prodded.

“Well...” I glanced over at her and saw her lip quivering. “It’s nothing really. Just sad leaving the cabin.”

I squeezed her hand. “I know. But we’ll be back. I have to be in S.F. for the launch because it’s too hard to launch from the cabin. I’ve tried. And I have to fly to a bunch of book signings, so I will need to be near the airport for convenience.”

She nodded, and I saw her lip still quivered. My gut told me something else was going on.

“Remember the last time you were upset and didn’t open up to me,” I began, though I kept my tone light and almost playful. “Don’t think I won’t pull this car over,” I added with a smile.

For the first time, she looked away from the window and stared at me. Once she saw that I wasn’t truly threatening a spanking, she turned her gaze back to the rows and rows of trees that we passed by.

“Tessa—”

My phone rang, interrupting me. I pulled my hand away from Tessa’s and answered the call through the speaker in the car, and saw Tessa give a big sigh of relief.

“What’s up, Brett?” I answered since I had seen his name come up on caller ID. “We’re in the car now heading back.”

“Good. Is Tessa there with you?” he asked.

“I’m here,” she chimed in.

“Good. So, I got done talking with the PR team, and they decided that because of the possible movie deal, and to lead up to your new release, they want to send you on a book tour. I emailed you the locations. And before I hear any groaning,” he cut in, making me smile at how well the man knew me, “it puts us in a better negotiating

spot with the studio executives if we can get your book back on the bestseller list. Which the PR crew feel they can do with some well placed ads and some outreach on your end.”

“Fine,” I answered, maybe a little too quickly. I should have made my friend sweat a bit before giving in just for fun.

“Good, good. I’m assuming Tessa will arrange all your travel, or do you want me to get that covered?”

“I have it covered,” Tessa answered with confidence, which made me happy. Though I could still see sadness in her eyes and her body seemed to slump down in the seat.

“Okay. I won’t keep you any longer then,” Brett said. “And I will let the team know you’re on board. Text me later when you arrive safely.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

When I hung up the phone, I glanced at Tessa. “You sure you got that handled?”

“Sure. I’ll book the hotels and air. No problem. Will you be wanting a car in any of the places?”

“No.” I paused noticing how cold she was in the way she asked the question. “Okay, enough. Tell me what is going on. I can feel it. I can hear it. I don’t want to keep asking.” My tone grew firm, but I felt I had no other choice. We were getting closer to the city, and I didn’t want to end the trip on a sour note. Something was off, and there was something Tessa wasn’t telling me.

She sighed deeply, her shoulders rising and falling in what appeared to be defeat. “I just didn’t want to leave the cabin. To leave... you.”

“Me? You aren’t having to leave me. Last I checked, I didn’t fire you.” I reached for her hand again, but this time, she pulled it away.

“Got it. Loud and clear,” she snapped.

“Got what?” I could feel my jaw tighten, and I took a deep breath of my own to steady my temper. My patience was growing thin, and I didn’t want this to turn into a fight when I seriously had no idea what we would even be fighting over.

“I have my marching orders when we return.” She looked at me and gave a fake smile. “You got it, boss.”

“Tessa...” I warned. “I have no idea what is going on, but I’m not liking this tone.”

Finally she snapped. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she seethed between clenched teeth. “Am I not being a respectful employee? Am I not being a good and dutiful assistant? I guess my title as your fuck buddy ended. I suppose I was fired from being the woman you kissed and loved on only last night.”

“Is this what has you so upset?” I asked, considering pulling over so I could look her directly in the eye, but we were on the freeway in steady flowing traffic and there really wasn’t a good place to pull over.

“I guess I just wasn’t truly aware of my job duties and what they were. Different for the cabin, clearly.”

“No. Nothing is changing,” I began.

“Everything is changing!” she snapped back as she pressed herself against the door like she couldn’t get far enough away from me.

“Yes,” I said calmly. “Some things will change now that we’re back in the city. But that doesn’t mean—”

“That we are anything more than employee and boss. Like I said. Got it. Loud and clear.”

“Tessa, you need to calm down.”

“I’m calm. Perfectly.” A lone tear fell down from her cheek, and her pain nearly broke my heart.

“I don’t know what’s going on, or why you think that you and I—”

“I don’t think anything,” she interrupted again. “I don’t think anything.”

We were getting closer to the city, and I didn't want to continue this fight in the car. Being in the confined space, not being able to handle things my way, was going to drive me insane. This little raging beauty needed a quick trip over my lap to have her temper spanked right out of her. There was no reasoning with her when she was this way. I could see that.

"We're almost in the city. Let's discuss this at your place. What exit do I take to get there?" I realized I had no idea what part of town she lived in, and I could easily be taking the long way there if I didn't get directions fast.

Her body stiffened. "You can just... we can just go back to your house, and I will catch the bus from there."

"No. I want to take you home. And I also want to continue this discussion—in a more productive way."

"Your place is fine," she tried again.

"Tessa, I said no," I said, a little more harshly than I intended. "Now give me your address."

"I don't have an address!" she shouted as the tears began to fall. "There! Are you happy? I have no place to go. I have no plans on what to do. I took your job so I would finally have a home. I was living in a weekly motel before that. Which is exactly where I will go back, but I don't need you to be the one to drop me off there in your fancy Jeep."

Her words were like a punch to the gut. "You didn't tell me." I paused to try to make sense of her words. "You don't have a home? I had assumed you packed up a few bags from an apartment or... I don't know. I had no idea that—"

“That I was homeless? That you essentially hired a bum to be your assistant? Do you think you would have hired me had you known? So now you can just fire me and be on your way to your fancy author life with your fancy movie. Your homeless assistant clearly does not belong in that life.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 8:08 am

Her words and her situation caused my head to spin. “Whether you have a place to go to now or not does not make a difference in whether or not you’re my assistant,” I said as I made the exit toward my house. “And yes, you should have told me all of this before I hired you, and most certainly before we left the cabin and headed home.”

“I don’t have a home,” she said softly.

“Exactly my point. Don’t you think this is a detail I should have been made aware of?” I took a deep breath as I tried to process the information that I’d truly had no idea about. Was I completely blind? Clueless? “And this is something you should have told me since you and I are—”

“Are what?” she interrupted. “I’m your fuck buddy? Assistant with benefits? Dirty muse?”

Stopping at a stoplight, I turned so I could look at her head on. “Is that what you really think? You truly believe that’s how I see you?”

She shrugged her shoulders and stared out the window, avoiding my stare completely. “I don’t know what to believe.”

I continued driving as the light turned green, grateful for something to do so I didn’t throttle the woman. How could she think I thought so little of her? After the time we had spent together, I would have thought she realized how much I truly cared.

“Where are we going?” she asked, though it was more of a mumble than anything.

“Home. My home.” I turned down the familiar street leading to my city house. “Our home.”

Chapter Eighteen

Tessa

I looked at Price in disbelief. Had I heard him wrong? “What do you mean by ‘our home’?”

Those were two words I had never truly been able to say in my life. The closest I had ever come was playing house with Price in the mountains. But that was just play.

Playtime with his toy.

“I don’t know why you would keep something like this from me. Where were you living before we left for the cabin?”

“I told you. A weekly,” I answered, feeling more ashamed than I had ever felt in my life. “I didn’t want you to know that. I was essentially one step from being homeless, which wasn’t something new in my life. My mother and I lived like that my entire childhood. It was all I ever knew.” I sighed. “It’s all I ever still know.”

I watched the scenery change from a city feeling to a more residential one. I had only been to Price’s twice, so I wasn’t sure I would have been able to pick out his house in the row of snugly fit houses in the hilly neighborhood.

“No. It isn’t what you still know. That’s going to change.” He paused for what felt like an eternity and the silence in the car made me nervous. “So, you have some choices. You can live with me. I have plenty of room. Or I can help you find a place. I’ve paid you enough for the time working for me that you should be able to afford

the down payment, and if not, I will help you with it. And I pay well, so staying in a long-term place shouldn't be an issue."

We pulled up to his house, and he opened the single car garage door and waited for it to raise.

"The question is," he continued as he drove into the garage that sat underneath his house, "what do you want?"

"I don't want to be a bother," I began.

"Is that what you think you are to me as well? So in addition to being nothing but my fuck buddy and dirty muse, you're also a bother?"

He turned off the Jeep and turned so he could look at me. I could see a twinge of pain flash across his eyes. My words weren't coming out the way I intended. I certainly didn't want to hurt Price.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and my damn lip that I could never control when I was upset began to quiver. "I don't know... I mean, I don't want you to think that..." I paused and looked down at my lap. His stare was too intense, and it was making me lose my words. Finally, I looked him straight in the eyes and pulled every ounce of courage I had to ask the question that I had wanted to know but was too scared to ask. "What are we? Do you see more in me than your assistant?"

"Of course," he answered back a little too quickly. "I don't sleep with my assistants. I don't care for my assistants, and I most certainly don't love my assistants."

My heart beat so hard, that it seemed to be stopping itself. "Love? Did you say—"

"Yes, Tessa. I love you. And clearly I haven't been doing a good job making you feel

that, but I thought you knew.”

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“How would I know that?” I asked, feeling a bit defensive that he made it seem so simple. “You never said the words to me. And when it came to leaving the mountain, you started making plans—or wanting me to make the plans—to leave for L.A. and for signings. You never once mentioned me. Or us.”

Price reached out and ran his fingertips down the side of my head, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. “First of all, you are my assistant. Which means you travel with me to these types of events. I’m sorry. I guess I should have been more clear on what would be expected of you once we returned back to reality and city life.”

I opened my mouth to ask about us, but he cut me off before I could utter a word.

“As for us. I want nothing to change. How we were at the cabin is how I see us, and want us to be in the city. Every day no matter where we are. I want my toy, and to be able to play with her whenever I want,” he said with a devilish smirk and a wink.

He leaned in close enough that he could take hold of the back of my head and pull me into a kiss. He claimed my mouth just as he had so many times before. Before, when we were safe and secure on the mountain. Before real life stepped in. Before I had to return to a life that I so desperately wanted to leave behind me, never to return to.

As his tongue danced with mine, I leaned closer to him, wanting him to desperately back out of the garage and head back to the cabin. Back to the only place that ever felt like home. Felt like my home.

“I didn’t want to leave,” I mumbled against the kiss.

He pulled away just enough that he could look into my eyes again. “You aren’t leaving me. I’m not leaving you.” He gave me a quick peck to end the more passionate kiss and added, “But I should have made that more clear. I suppose we should have had the talk about us. And what us would look like once we returned to San Francisco. But I know one thing. I love you. Those are words that I don’t say lightly.”

“I love you too. And those are words I don’t say at all,” I said softly.

I saw the biggest smile form on his face, not only with his mouth but with his eyes. “I like hearing those words from your perfect lips.” He sat back and opened his door. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to sit in the garage anymore. We have a lot of work to do, trips to plan, and a future to spend together.”

I got out of the Jeep feeling as if a huge weight had left my shoulders, but also so excited for what was to come. Price had a way of making everything so simple. So black and white. Black and white like the words he masterfully put on paper.

“The good news for me,” he said as we entered the house, “is I get to save on hotel expenses now.” He chuckled. “My assistant will be sharing the room with me.”

“I call that service. You have a good employee on your hands. She sounds like a Jack of all trades,” I joked back. “She meets every one of your dark demands.”

“She is, and she does. She’s my assistant. My muse. My love. My everything.”

The End