



Bound and Branded

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: There's always a lesson to be learned.

Avery

I hate Caleb Flynn with every fiber of my being. The rich, arrogant cowboy has been buying up chunks of my family's ranch for years, and now he's given my dad a loan to cover his gambling debts. He owns us, and I think he likes it that way. So I offer a trade: I'll work off my dad's debt by scrubbing his floors. I think he likes to humiliate me anyway, so why not? And if I pass the time messaging the Dom I matched with in The Club app while I'm supposed to be cleaning, my new boss will never know...

Caleb

Avery Carmichael has been a pretty thorn in my side for years. She sees me as the enemy and that's just fine. I want her, but the truth is, I know she can't handle me. I'm too old for her, too rough for her, and I wouldn't know the first thing about having a relationship. I find my subs in the Club App. No emotional connection, no strings. But when I hear a message chime from the room Avery is cleaning – right after I message the brand new sub who wants to arrange a scene with me – I know that fate has other ideas. So I'll give her the lesson she's after, but I can't give her anything more. All we have is the training. So I'll make it count.

Look for other books in the Lessons in Dominance series: AFTER HOURS by Caitlin Crews, HARD DISCIPLINE by Jackie Ashenden and BAD GIRL DILEMMA by Zara Cox.

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Chapter One

Avery

There are two things that I'm certain of. The first is that every morning, no matter how tired I am, the sun is going to rise in the east and I'm going to have to get my ass out of bed to do the chores.

The second is that I hate Caleb Flynn.

I'm not exaggerating. It isn't mild dislike. It's the real deal. I burn with it. He's my nemesis, and has been ever since he bought that big plot of land next to ours. Ever since he built that giant, ostentatious house that stands on top of the mountain looking down on us like we're peasants and he's the king.

Though, to him, I suppose that's the reality.

I don't like change, and the first strike against him was that he changed my daily view. No longer do I look up and see the unadulterated mountains, I also see his monstrosity of a house.

It's a beautiful house, but that's not the point. It's different. I get to hate it.

The second strike against him was when he bought up one hundred acres of our property. He made my dad an offer he couldn't refuse and my dad took it. I'm mad at my dad about it, too, don't worry.

I'm fair with my hatred.

At least, I like to think so.

Since he bought up that hundred acres five years ago, he's also bought fifty more. I'm struggling to keep things going while Dad refuses to give me total control, and this guy looming about all the time isn't helping.

So when I come into the house at dinnertime and he's there, the acid churn in my stomach doesn't surprise me. Doesn't even disturb me. It's all the other feelings.

Because the problem is, even though I hate Caleb Flynn from the top of his cowboy hat down to the soles of his cowboy boots, he's also as hot as the fires of the hell that I would like to send him to.

It doesn't make any logical sense. It never has. I blame that night all those years ago. He did something to me. Changed something. Something I didn't want changed.

As far as my daily life goes, I want to be in charge.

No, I need to be in charge.

For as long as I can remember, control has the most important thing in my life. Mainly because neither of my parents has any. I love my dad, but without me, the ranch would've fallen apart a long time ago.

Caleb leases the land he bought back to us, and he thinks that gives him the right to come here when he wants to, to weigh in on our ranching practices and in general be around when I think he has no business being here.

Caleb is... Well, he's the kind of man who thinks he's in charge of everything. He's

the kind of man who thinks that the sun rises and sets on his word. No. It's going to do that regardless. One of those certainties.

Just like I'm going to keep on hating him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

As soon as the words exit my mouth, my dad comes in from the kitchen with two beers in his hand.

"Avery," he says. "Mr. Flynn is our guest."

I make direct eye contact with Mr. Flynn, those blue eyes scorching me. "Is that a fact?"

"It is," my dad says, sitting heavily in the chair next to Caleb, and handing him a beer. Caleb looks at me meaningfully as he takes a long pull from the bottle.

"I'll have the papers for you to sign by tomorrow," Caleb says.

"No!" The word explodes from my mouth. "No. You're not selling him more of our land."

"Avery..." My dad sounds exhausted, but how the fuck does he think I feel? I'm the one who runs this place. I'm the one who makes sure that we have a ranch. I manage our ranch hands and I keep up with the business aspects of it. I oversee the birthing, raising, and slaughtering of the cattle, the selling of all the meat. This is mine. My blood, my sweat, my tears—and he's been parceling the ranch out to Caleb for years.

He might not be a property developer, but as far as I'm concerned, he might as well be. He's a rhinestone cowboy if anything. Just a rich dickhead who's doing this

because he can. Buying up land and not even working it.

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And what's the point of that?

I'm about to say exactly that when he stands. "We'll talk more tomorrow."

He looks at me, just for a second, and everywhere his gaze touches, I burn. With fury, with something else. But it's like I can't move. Like he's immobilized me with just his glance. I hate that too.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Business. With your father."

He walks past me like I'm incidental. Like I don't matter. Like my feelings mean nothing. But I suppose to him my feelings don't mean a damn thing.

He walks out the front door, and I go after him.

I can hear my father's voice as I slam the door shut. No. He doesn't get to tell me what to do, not when I have to do everything. He doesn't get to exercise authority when he feels like it. Not when he can't keep the place stable without me.

"What's going on? I have a right to know. My dad's name might be on this land, but I'm the one running it."

He stops then and I keep going, bringing me almost toe to toe with him, and I can barely breathe. He's stunning, that's the problem. So tall and broad, his hair dark, and though I've rarely seen him without a hat, I know it curls just a bit at the top and

around his collar. His eyes are a piercing blue I can feel all the way through my body.

He's not quick with a smile, his mouth is grim, and dark stubble covers his square jaw. He's more than classically handsome. It's almost enraging. Why should one man get wealth, strength, height and looks so fine they could topple mountains?

I'm short and poor with hard won strength in my bony arms and deeply average breasts, which as far as I'm aware is the main feature men look at – unless they're into asses. As far as your face goes, if you're competent with makeup the glitter and flash seems to read as 'beautiful' to them no matter how your features are actually arranged.

I'm bad with makeup.

And I had one man who seemed totally fine with all that and I tanked that relationship.

Caleb Flynn remains tall, gorgeous, and in my grill.

"I'm aware," he says, his gaze assessing. "Avery, you might not know anything about me, but I know everything about you. Everything about this ranch. I know what financial state you're in."

"I know that we burn through a lot of money –"

"No, you burn through money you don't have. I don't think you know how bad it is. Do you know how much your dad gambles?"

The words are like a slap. "Some."

"He's an addict."

“He’s not an addict. He just... Likes to blow off a little steam.”

“Avery, you’re in danger of not ever having a shred of this ranch without my intervention. Luckily, I’m stepping in.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your dad is borrowing money from me, but he’s using the ranch as collateral.”

“Are you... Are you kidding me?”

“No. I’m not.”

“This is our land. You... You’re a predatory son of a bitch. You’ve been buying off chunks of this property ever since you moved in, and this is what you’ve been waiting for.”

“What the fuck do you think will happen if I don’t intervene?” he asks, moving toward me, and I’m reminded of just how big he is. Broad, like the side of a mountain. Well over six feet.

“I don’t...”

“Of course not, because you still trust him.”

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I scowl. “He’s my father. I know he’s not good with money, but I do a good job of managing this place, and we have enough.”

“You don’t,” he says. “You, Avery Carmichael, are fucked.”

The words are hard, crude and unforgiving and I find myself having to tamp down my physical reaction to them.

“Explain,” I say.

“He owes people a lot of money and he hasn’t been paying your mortgage. You’re one more bad bet away from losing this place entirely. And not to me, to people who will put you out on the street.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. “That’s not true.”

“It is.” He laughs. “You like to think of me as a villain, but have you forgotten that I let you off the hook when you tried to burn my barn down?”

The one bad thing I ever did and he has to throw it back in my face and try to make me grateful for it.

“I haven’t forgotten that you deserved it,” I say.

“I could’ve called the police on you.”

“You’re welcome to do it now. I’ll confess.”

“No thanks. I don’t have the appetite for it.”

“Are you trying to act like you’re being a hero?”

“No,” he says. “I’m not being a hero. Though, whether you believe it or not, I actually like your father. And I don’t have any desire to see the two of you out on the street. Even though you’ve been a pain in my ass ever since I moved up here.”

“Then why are you doing this?” I ask.

“It’s a good goddamned question, Avery. Maybe because you’re my neighbors, and have been for five years, and it’s about the longest I’ve ever had neighbors.” He looks at me, and my whole body feels warm. “Come over tomorrow morning. We’ll have a talk.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“The fact that you’re standing out here running your mouth seems to suggest otherwise.”

“I don’t?—”

“Quiet,” he says. “I’m done with it. I’m done with your attitude, I’m done with you. Go inside. Come up to my place tomorrow, and we’ll talk.”

Something in me goes quiet, and I want to resist it. All of it. I feel myself pushing back against the need rising up inside of me to obey him.

I have to keep this sexual psychosis contained.

There’s a place for it, and it’s not here, not with him.

“Go inside. Be a good girl.”

It’s like an arrow straight between my legs. Right where I feel myself starting to ache when I look at him. I tell myself that I’m only obeying him because that’s the actual surprise. That I’d do what he said instead of arguing, and I’d rather surprise him.

Then I go upstairs without speaking to my father and slam the door shut behind me.

I spend the whole rest of the night going over every problematic interaction I’ve ever had with him.

Caleb Flynn.

He’s from here, originally. Though, I don’t remember him from before. Probably because he’s somewhere around fifteen years older than me, so I have no reason to. A foster kid, who went off and got rich doing something with luxury resort development. He’s a billionaire. Came back and bought land looking over the town to make a point, I would think.

He moved into that big house on the hill. Then my dad sold him half our ranch. He put Dad under a lot of pressure and my mom had just left for the third and final time so it was a rough run of luck for us.

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I was livid. More than that I felt reckless – something I never was. Something I could never afford to be. But my life was falling apart and he felt like a good target for my anger.

He caught me, grabbed hold of me and slammed me up against the side of that barn, hands tight around my wrists. It had felt like a fight.

And it had felt like sex, for all an eighteen-year-old virgin could know what sex felt like.

All that rage directed against me, the fierce control of his strength. The way his large hands had directed my movements. I felt powerless.

He could have done anything he wanted to me in that moment, and instead of fear I'd felt...

Turned on.

You get the hell out of here, he'd said. And give thanks that nobody got hurt, and that I'm not calling the police on you. You fucking brat.

His words stuck with me. And even now, they meld into my fantasies, twisting themselves up in my head and turning into something else.

Fucking brat. He said that to me while he moved his hand from my wrist to my throat...

And I get off on that memory. Every time. Every time I see him I feel an explosion of heat that's not solely about hatred.

It fills me with shame. Then a deep sense of fear. It's what's been driving me the last few months. As pressure on the ranch has been building, it's been pushing me toward the thing I've been avoiding figuring out about myself.

Instead of sleeping I open up The Club app, which has become the dirtiest of my dirty secrets. I've been going over and over my desires for a while now. Why every interaction I have with men leaves me so unsatisfied. I blame Caleb, actually. That interaction that we had when I was young. The way he held me, the way he used his strength against me. It's like it broke something in me. Like it turned me into a monster that I don't even recognize.

And it's finally driven me to this.

There aren't very many experienced Dominants in rural Oregon.

I've been considering actually experimenting with BDSM for a while. There's no one I can talk to about it. Not here. All of my friends would be utterly and completely scandalized, and then they'd be afraid.

For me, for my sanity. Afraid I'm like my mom because obviously she's a slut and therefore I must be drawn toward slut behavior because of her.

I'd be lying if I said that didn't get twisted up inside me sometimes. As far as I know, my mom's thing isn't kink—God, I never want to know what her thing is—but it seemed like it had more to do with just wanting to get away from my dad.

But I can't deny that it puts me in a weird shame place. I tried. I tried to want a nice, normal guy who gave the potential of a nice, normal life and nice, normal sex and I

blew that up three months ago.

After he proposed.

I panicked. Like a spooked horse trying to escape a barn.

I had felt like I loved John but then it just felt like more responsibility piled on top of everything I was already dealing with and I couldn't bear it. I wanted to feel like someone could take care of me, which is a simultaneously terrifying thought since I'd have to trust them in order to do that, and I don't trust anyone like that.

How can I?

Which is why this is a fantasy, though one I've been edging closer to making real. If I can pull the trigger.

My research has led me down a whole lot of rabbit holes and I've nearly leapt into a few really sketchy choices. I looked into physical sex clubs, but I don't like the idea of doing anything in front of anyone. Plus, I would have to travel to a bigger city and that already feels scary given that I've so rarely been outside my hometown.

I want a little secret trouble. I don't want big bad trouble where your body ends up floating in the Columbia River because you went for an orgasm and got serial killed instead. No thanks.

I've always been good. Because I have to be. Because if I'm not good, then the ranch is going to fall apart. My parents were dissolute and irresponsible – though to give my dad his due, he's still here.

The one time I ever misbehaved was when I sneaked onto Caleb's land and nearly burned his barn to the ground. As misbehavior went, it was relatively spectacular.

It wasn't BDSM club spectacular.

That's how I ended up finding The Club app, during a desperate Google search that went something like How Do I Find a Dom Who Won't Kill Me If I Also Don't Want to Get Railed In Front of a Room Full of Strangers.

They really do have apps for everything.

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It's dedicated to helping kinky people find a partner in their area who matches their personal needs.

Everyone is vetted, their identities verified, and there's a lot of built-in protection in that. People have STD tests on file and their actual government names, even though you don't see them when you're chatting in the app.

The people running it know and if something was going to happen to you, they would know where you were and who you met with. There's just a whole lot of security built-in, and I like that.

I think.

Of course, I am also still terrified. I've only been with the one man and I assumed I'd marry him because part of me wanted to slip into an easy partnership that had some security.

The truth is, in action, I've always been the one in charge during sex too. I can't get out of my own head and I like directing things because it feels easier, safer.

The really weird thing about my BDSM fixation, my fantasies about being powerless, about being forced...is that it's nothing I've even come close to doing in real life. It's nothing I would say fits my personality at all.

BDSM is not a quick fuck. And I'm aware of that. There's something about it that terrifies me. The idea of giving my control away.

It's a particular kind of fear. One that attracts me more than it repulses me.

But the truth is, none of the sex that I've had has sparked the kind of need in me that the one angry encounter I had with Caleb has. The way he held me, his hands around my wrists like manacles. I'm intrigued by it.

I swallow hard, and open up the two Dom profiles that I've been eyeing on the app.

There's one guy who lives local who's into pain. Pain and rough sex, which intrigues me, I'm not going to lie. But it's not quite what I'm after.

That very thought makes me laugh at myself. What am I after? Who can say. It's not like I know.

I swipe away from that profile and look at the next. He goes by The Duke and I'm not sure if that's a John Wayne reference – which I wouldn't know if my grandma hadn't been obsessed with him – or if he's trying to get the girls who are into Bridgerton. I can't work that one out. I'm not sure I need to.

He's into bondage. Elaborate knots and a total surrender of control. Dubious consent role-play.

Every time I read those words I start getting hot.

And I am intrigued in spite of myself. Mainly because nothing scares me more than the idea of losing control, and there's something that's so attractive to me about the idea that I could flirt with a loss of control while also having all these firm agreements in place.

It feels like something I could keep control over in a way. Something that I could maintain a grip on.

Just looking at the words in his profile starts to ramp up my libido. I've messaged him twice. He knows that I live in the area and that I'm an inexperienced submissive.

He told me that he likes to train subs who are trying to get into the lifestyle.

Just that word, training, that should make me mad. But it doesn't.

I think about messaging him, but instead I just read over our previous interactions.

I like to train submissives. Teach them to take everything I can give. Show them their limits.

I put my hand between my legs and start to touch myself. Everything is terrible, honestly. But this fantasy, this fantasy that I will probably never act on, fuels me now. It makes me feel like everything isn't terrible.

I put my fist in my mouth as I bring myself to the peak with record speed.

God. Just thinking about him, this man that I've never seen...

It pushes me right over the edge. But I would be lying if I didn't say that I was imagining those cool blue eyes looking at me as I shudder out my orgasm.

I grit my teeth and throw my arm over my face. As long as I don't think about that tomorrow when I have to face him, I'll be fine.

Lucky, I'm practiced at that. Lucky that when I'm actually around him, the hatred usually takes over.

But for tonight, I'm just going to let myself relax into my sexual satisfaction.

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I don't have anything else for me. Nothing else but this.

So I'm going to hold it close while I can.

Chapter Two

Avery

I get up and I'm vaguely ashamed about what I did the night before, which is stupid. I don't have baggage about masturbation. But I am mixed up in a lot of shame around my desires and the fact that I'm even considering hooking up with a stranger to express those desires. It just isn't me.

But I'm also about to lose my mind with everything going on with the ranch, and this is about the only thing I can think of that quiets the panic in me.

I put it to the side now, and make myself a very strong pot of coffee before getting in my truck and heading up toward Caleb's ranch. If you can even call it that. He has horses—beautiful horses—and an absolutely glorious facility, but it's not like ours. Not a real, working cattle ranch with work that actually has to be done.

I do my best not to admire the view as I drive up the long, dirt road that leads to the top of the mountain where his house sits. The stunning valley below, bathed in golden light. My own ranch which looks idyllic and pristine and not like hard work and grit, when I'm all the way up here.

He wouldn't know anything about that. About the hard work that it takes to run a

ranch, about everything I do, and have done since I was sixteen, to keep it running. I'm twenty-four now and feeling older and also desperately behind on everything and too tired to pull ahead.

He doesn't know anything about that.

The guy is a billionaire. He's playing at being a cowboy.

I tell myself that as he walks out onto the front porch, the spitting image of every cowboy fantasy anyone's ever had. Stetson firmly in place, broad shouldered, tight black T-shirt, and painted on jeans. My mouth is dry, and I have to remind myself that he is not a fantasy. He's the enemy.

"Good morning," he says.

"Not really," I say.

"I've got an offer for you," he says. "Work for me and that work can go toward your dad's debt."

I am shocked by the statement. Immobilized. I cross my arms and tilt my chin up, trying not to look surprised like I feel. "There's not any work to do here," I say. "And I'm busy."

"With your ever-shrinking ranch?"

"You—"

"Your dad is in deep, Avery. I know you don't want to hear it. Least of all from me. But I don't make myself a presence in your life for my own entertainment."

“Then why do you do it?”

He shrugs. As if my survival is a casual gesture for him. “Worst case scenario I end up with the land next to mine and it doesn’t become a whole subdivision.”

“How benevolent.”

“I never said that I was benevolent.” His eyes connect with mine. “Everyone wants something.”

The way that he looks at me sends a shiver down my spine. I’m suddenly aware that I’m alone with him. Like I was that night that I tried to light his barn on fire. That he could do whatever he wanted with me.

“You can work for me by cleaning my house.”

The comment sends me back down to earth with a thud. All he wants from me is for me to be a cleaner. All he wants is to humiliate me. I get it. Kind of. I did something to him, tried to sabotage his ranch six years ago, and I suppose this is a way of him getting some back. Even just a little bit.

It makes him a dick, though. I was eighteen when I did that and there was no real damage. But he’s just the kind of man who holds a grudge while holding all the power on top of it.

“You want me to be your maid?” I ask.

“Functionally. Would you take the money for nothing?”

I stare at him. “What?”

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“If I just decided to write the debt off, as a gift, would you take it?”

I stare at him. At that sculpted face, the lines by his eyes, the deep grooves by his mouth. The angular shape of his jaw. He’s hard. All over. Set in his ways and brutal, which is a strange word to apply to a modern man, though he feels more like a relic to me.

In my way, making proclamations about what we were supposed to do with our land. Invading my dreams, my fantasies.

“No,” I say.

Because I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t trust a gift from Caleb Flynn, not for any reason at all.

“I didn’t think so. So I’m offering you a job. An official way to work the debt off. Your father hasn’t signed any papers yet. You and I can. The money will be considered paid back to me.”

“Just for some housework?”

“Yes.”

This is a game, and I don’t like it.

I’ve never fully had him figured out. Hell, I don’t have him figured out even a little bit. I don’t know why he’s here in this small town if he’s everything that people say he is – and according to the internet he is. Wealthy beyond the scope of my

comprehension and able to live anywhere he wants.

Yet he chooses to be here. And play with me, apparently.

He's probably a sociopath. Playing experimental games on the little people, trying to see what they'll do. If they'll jump when he says.

"I still have chores."

"Get them done early. Come over here in the afternoon. You can do my laundry, dishes, and meal prep. Your dad says you're a pretty good cook."

I grind my teeth together. "You've talked to my father about me?"

His face goes hard. "Whether you believe it or not, your dad loves you. In fact, he's damned proud of you. He knows you're the reason that the ranch is staying afloat."

"I would never know that based on how he acts."

He shrugs. "Well, I wouldn't know how dads usually behave. Given that I don't remember my own."

If that's supposed to humanize him, make me feel something for him, then he's an idiot. It doesn't. It won't.

"Come inside," he says. "I'll show you around the place."

He opens up the door and I'm ushered into a modern, rustic masterpiece. The tall windows in the living room are floor-to-ceiling, and look out at that same view I was just admiring on the drive up. He can see my house from here. My ranch. My every move. My chest goes tight, along with my throat. I am quite literally under his eye all

day, every day, if he so chooses.

It's a creepy way to look at it, I grant, but I'm not really sure how else to look at it at the moment. I curl my fingers into fists and fight against the strange, throbbing feeling between my legs and the way my heart is beating faster in my chest.

The house is beautiful and tidy enough that I question why he needs help with anything. He gestures to the right. "This way's the kitchen."

The kitchen is even more spectacular than the living room. Massive with smooth appliances. All kinds of modern technology that we certainly don't have. Our house could probably fit inside his living room.

He moves me through the kitchen into the dining room, then gestures up the stairs. "Bedrooms are up there. Bathrooms. There is a laundry room down there. I'd appreciate help with the folding and washing."

I can't escape the feeling that I am a child being given busywork. That he's patronizing me. Well, he is. He made it pretty clear. He knew that I wouldn't take the money back without some kind of real deal in place. Some kind of real trade. It's a sop to my ego, and even though I know that, I'm still going to take it. Which is annoying as fuck. But I don't trust him. Nor do I have any reason to. But he seems to know that too.

"You can start this morning, since you're already here. I've got the ingredients for roast, if you wouldn't mind putting it in the crockpot."

Somehow, I have a feeling that he knew that I would agree to this, that those ingredients are in the house because he anticipated my acquiescence, and that makes me want to punch him in that proud jaw.

But then, I always want to punch him in that proud jaw as much as I want to have him wrap his hands around my wrists and pin me down.

God. I have to stop thinking things like that while I'm here. Not in the relative safe space of my room.

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“Do all the laundry, fold it. You’ll find my room easy enough and I have a feeling you’re smart enough to figure out where things go with context clues.”

I open my mouth to argue back.

“Do as you’re told,” he says, his voice hard. And it’s that same response that I had to him last night. That part of myself that goes quiet underneath those ice blue eyes. That commanding tone.

He stares at me, like he sees something inside of me. Like he sees the shift that has occurred deep within me.

Like he knows.

I can think of nothing worse. Nothing worse than Caleb looking at me and knowing my secret fantasies. These things that call up so much sick shame inside of me. So much fear. These things that I want in spite of myself.

No. Those are my secrets. Mine. And maybe I’ll share them with The Duke. Or maybe I won’t. Maybe it’ll only ever be a chat in an app and nothing that actually happens in my real life. But him seeing it— the very idea of that makes me feel exposed, raw and naked in front of him, and I want to hide.

“I’ll be back this afternoon.”

I realize that he means to leave me alone in the house. I don’t know why, but it feels like a test. Like a strange power game, and I can’t quite grasp onto why or what it

could mean.

But before I can, he's gone. And I'm left to my own devices in this huge, sprawling place.

I'm angry as I dig into the refrigerator, take out the roast, and stick it in the crockpot. Furious as I begin to prep the potatoes and the carrots.

I'm angry that he knows I can cook. I'm angry that he knows anything about me and that my dad sold me out like this.

I don't understand why he do that.

Why he would ever speak my name to this man that he knows I don't like.

Though, Dad has never cared how I feel about Caleb. He's always done business with him and given him all this input on the ranch, whether I wanted him to or not.

The trouble is, there's something soothing about working in the house and I'm irritated that it quiets some of my rage.

Very irritated.

Because I prefer to be incandescent so that my mind can't slip into the most dangerous space. Where I start thinking about my current obsession. About the Club, and the Duke, and whether or not I'm actually going to meet him. About the ways in which that fantasy crosses over with Caleb himself.

Fucking dangerous.

I go to the laundry room, and find a load of clean clothes in the dryer. I'm touching

his clothes. It feels intimate, even though the clothes are clean. Even though it's jeans and very little else.

I take the load of clean washing into the living room and sit on the couch, methodically folding at each item of clothing and ignoring the building tension in my stomach.

It's easy for me to imagine that he's watching me. Judging me. Needing me to do a good job. I find myself sliding off the edge of the couch and getting on my knees on the living room floor as I continue with my job. Trying to make the clothes perfect. Perfect for him. And if I don't succeed, maybe I'll be punished. The thought shocks me. Jolts me out of my daydream. This is getting very weird, and very dangerous. I'm actually in the man's house having unbidden sexual fantasies about laundry. That's weird.

Fucking weird.

I gather up the folded clothing and make my way upstairs. He didn't show me around up here. I push open one door and find a bedroom that's almost exactly how I would've imagined it if I was tasked with creating what I thought would be the ideal bedroom for Caleb. The bed is rustic, made of natural slabs of wood with a Pendleton-style bedspread. It's Western, as committed to the cowboy aesthetic as he is, and masculine.

I go inside and I tried to see if there are any clues about who he is as a man. I don't know why I'm doing that either. Except the teenage girl in me who sneaked onto the ranch and tried to burn it to the ground wants me to. She's curious and I have to admit that I am, too.

I pull open the top drawer of his dresser and find black briefs folded with precision. I don't know why, but I feel a kick of satisfaction that I knew he would want his

laundry folded with even lines and sharp corners. That he does it for himself. Unless he has a housekeeper that he released for the special purpose of torturing me. Always a possibility.

Actually, if there's one thing that surprises me about him, it is the precision. I've known my share of cowboys. And though I've never had an intimate relationship with one, they're not known to be the neatest people. Hell, I'm not this neat. I'm busy. Up at the crack of dawn doing ranch work and I do my very best to keep mine in my dad's house in order, but it is what it is.

Caleb's living situation gives me the impression that he has never said it is what it is even one moment in his whole life.

But maybe that's why he's a billionaire and we're drowning in debt.

I turn and open up the side table drawer. Condoms. Lots of them. Absolutely no surprise. Because he's a man.

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And honestly he ought to have them. It's safe and all.

My mouth goes dry and I close the drawer quickly.

I move to the bathroom, where I open up the medicine cabinet and look at his aftershave, his razor.

He's not clean-shaven. He always has a neat beard and I would say that I don't like facial hair on men. John was clean-shaven.

Clean-shaven and soft in just about every way. Easy.

Caleb could never be called easy.

I shut the medicine cabinet and exit the bathroom, then walk out of the bedroom. I'm tempted to explore the rest of the upstairs. I push open the next door and find a study. It's full of books and I wonder if he's read a single one or if it's just part of the look. The proper adornments to give the room a homey feel.

I move into the room and over to the bookshelf. I touch the tops of the books, most of them leather bound with gold embossing on the spine. Which to me suggests aesthetic purchases rather than books bought to be read and treasured.

I make my way to the fireplace. There's a book sitting on the side table next to a wingback chair. And I touch the cover. I realize that I'm snooping and if he were to walk in at any point, or if there was surveillance, it looks like exactly what it is. I move my hand away from the book, turn around, and walk out of the room.

It's reasonable, I think, for me to see what each of the rooms on this floor are. But much less reasonable to be going through his things. I walk all the way down to the end of the hall and open the last door. The room is almost entirely windows. It faces not the view down below, but the mountain behind, surrounded by forest with no houses or humans in sight. It's entirely different to the first bedroom that I walked into that I assumed had to be his. This one is done in soft, neutral colors. The bed is the biggest one I've ever seen. Not a standard size at all. The bedspread looks like it's made of silk.

The bed is on a raised platform, with a headboard behind it. It's a strange headboard. Smooth wood with metal rings fastened to the posts.

It's like a spa, the kind of high-end resort that I've certainly never been to. There is a chaise lounge and another chair in the corner that almost seems incongruous. The whole room is incongruous with the rest of the house.

I wonder if it's guest quarters. That would be about the only thing that makes sense, because it doesn't seem to jibe with the whole rest of the place. Or with him.

I ease out of the room and close the door quietly behind me, not wanting to disturb a single thing in the space, though I don't know why that instinct feels so strong.

I go downstairs and check the dinner, then busy myself straightening and cleaning as much of the already-clean house as I can.

When he walks back in the door, my heart leaps up in my throat. I stand at attention like a soldier, my hands clasped behind my back as he shifts his cowboy hat on his head and looks down at me. "Smells good," he says, moving into the kitchen.

"I'll just go now," I say.

“You’re dismissed.”

The words are strange and formal and hit me hard in the pit of my stomach.

“Thank you. What time do you want me here tomorrow?”

“You can come at one. I’ll be expecting you.”

And with that, I make my way out of the house and back to my truck, taking the drive back to my house in near record time.

I feel guilty, because I know Dad had to eat left over sandwiches or something because I wasn’t there to cook for him. But the truth of the matter is, he’s a grown man who should be able to take more care of himself than he does.

I do it because on some level of always felt guilty about Mom leaving. Like it was my fault. Because things were okay with them before she had me, or at least that’s always the impression that I had.

Not that Dad has ever said that directly.

It’s just he’s always made it a point to tell me that I didn’t really know the woman that he fell in love with. Which means on some level I’m the one that changed her. I guess being a mother made her so miserable she had to go find herself in the beds of random men. And, eventually, out of state, and out of contact with her only child.

But right now I feel tired. Aware of the fact that this present situation is my dad’s fault.

I could leave. I could leave town and leave him. I could get a job at some other ranch. But then what am I? Our family land feels important to me, it feels grounding. I don’t

have other skills. Just ranching skills. And yeah, I could give them to somebody else. I feel squeezed. Like I'm being weighed down by everything, which is why I shut myself in the room and open the Club app before I can even think. It would be so nice to take a break from all this. To stop thinking.

I open up The Duke's profile. I message him. Before I can think better of it.

I think I'm getting closer to wanting to meet.

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I let out a breath, and set my phone down, going and putting my pajamas on. And I hear the chime that the app uses go off as I get a message. I race back over and look, my heart pounding.

What are you looking for?

His messages are always like that. They don't betray a hint of personality. He often doesn't even act like we've spoken before. I suppose I should be grateful. He isn't pressuring me. Far from it. A lot of Doms probably wouldn't have the patience for a sub waffling around in their DM's. But I'm not really a sub.

I might be.

It seems weird to take on an identity that has to do with sex. Especially because it's been such a nominal part of my life so far.

But it also feels so forbidden. Like something secret. Like something that's just mine.

I'm probably attracted to this for all the wrong reasons. Though, if there are right reasons for wanting to fling yourself into the bed of a kinky stranger, I'd love to know what they are.

All I have is bone deep weariness and desperation for something that I have a hard time naming.

I'm so tired of carrying everything. I just want to not think. I want someone else to make me feel good. Even if I resist. I want control to be taken away from me.

I can do that.

I want to ask him a hundred questions. But he's not a mentor or coach. He's a man I'm considering...

I close the app because I've gone and freaked myself out. Honestly, the whole day did. Getting turned on by a pile of laundry is a new low for me.

But then, my life is a new low for me at the moment. And tomorrow, I have to get up and face it all over again. The only way things are going to change is if I change them. I could set up a meeting with The Duke.

I go to sleep turning that over and over in my mind. And when I wake up, Caleb is the first thing I think of.

Chapter Three

Caleb

It's pretty fucked up that I have her working for me. And not the best show of restraint. But then, I'm not great with that outside of a scene.

Story of my life.

There's a reason I love nothing more than slipping into the role of Dominant. It allows me to take my shattered focus and hone in on two of my very favorite things. Ropes and a naked woman. What's not to like? I can play with those two things for hours.

Everything else? Not so much.

Of course, my erratic brain is the key to my success. The ability to home in on certain things, tune out others— that's a huge part of it.

But when I get obsessed with something, it's deep. It's real and impossible to shake.

That's Avery Carmichael for me.

And I fucking know better than to put her in my path.

It started when she tried to light my barn on fire. I don't usually get into brat shit, but her fury, her absolute biting fury at me, made me want to train that right out of her. Put her on her knees and hold her down while I fucked some respect into her.

That reaction to her was so visceral, the fantasy so specific and uncontained, that I made a vow then and there I'd never go there.

I'm careful with how I treat women.

What I like is so specific, so particular, that I have to keep it contained. And I do. There's a reason that I use the Club app to find my subs.

I've experimented with brick and mortar clubs, during times I've been in cities for work, but I've found it isn't really my thing. It's too personal. And I don't like it to be personal. I much prefer getting to make the arrangements in a sterile chat setting.

She gets to look at my list of qualifications and interests, and I get to look at hers. Without actually putting a face to the kink. I find that to be clarifying.

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And it's an equalizer. Which I also value. Because I like a hard-core game, and I like to push power dynamics to the limit. Which means I need a woman who can come to me on equal footing. Another reason that Avery is never going to be that woman.

She's fifteen years younger than me and I own her family at this point. Even though I've never intended to keep it all for myself.

I'm keeping it safe for her. Because her dad is just going to keep frittering it all away, and she's going to keep working herself to the bone, and for fucking what?

Once I realized how in deep her dad was, I started buying up acreage to hold it. She's been pissed about it, but it suits me to let her be. Because again, it keeps her well away from me.

I'm too old for her, too kinky for her, and honest to God, too fucked up.

But I'm drawn to her. Hell, if I thought that I had a real heart I might even say that I'm in love with her.

I don't know what love is, and I'm pretty sure my version of it is... Well, it's this, which is fucked. Let's be real.

I removed myself yesterday from the house because watching her serve me like that was going to push me to close to the edge.

What I need to do is get this little sub I have on the hook on The Club app to commit.

Normally I cast a wide net. I've flown women in from other cities to join me here in Oregon so that I can get what I need while I'm here on the ranch. But on a whim I decided to see who might be on the app here.

The pickings are slim.

A couple of Femme Dommies, one looking for men or women, one just looking for women, and another Dom. But no subs to be seen.

Until she popped up. I'd looked at her profile as soon as her name appeared.

Dove.

The name had brought something vulnerable and soft to mind. Something that needed to be protected. Cared for. That's not really my thing. But there was something about the image that works for me. I'd clicked her profile and seen that she was a brand-new sub who'd never done anything in the lifestyle before and needed training.

I won't lie, I like that sometimes. What I've learned about the world is that people are always going to fucking disappoint you. Every connection is temporary. Nothing is permanent, nothing is real.

I've never even come close to having an actual relationship. I've never had a sub that was actually mine for more than a pre-agreed to, short length of time.

But what I like about training new ones is that I'll always be their first. I'll always be the one who put them in touch with the thing that really turns them on, and there's something that appeases me. Maybe because I spent my childhood getting bounced from foster home to foster home, knowing that my shitty behavior was the only thing that was ever going to make me memorable. And I did my best to be memorable.

But I can make myself memorable to a sub in a whole different way.

Yeah, I need that, because I'm playing a dangerous game with Avery. A game that I told myself I wasn't going to play.

What I absolutely know is that when she shows up at the house I need to make myself scarce. The idea of watching her drop to her knees and clean the floor for me is too hot. It's playing too close to the edge of what I actually want. And as much as part of me likes the idea of getting a small hit of what it would be like to have her submission, the rest of me knows better than to play those games.

I'm not an inexperienced asshole. I know the rules. I'm an expert at my craft.

And I don't put women into BDSM scenarios without their explicit consent.

All the better to be able to go as hard as I want once we have the rules established.

But I do have to give her instructions first.

That thought is like a knife blade sliding under my skin, far too close to the bone.

I put it to the side as soon as I hear her truck pull into the driveway and I go to the front door, making sure that I'm standing out on the porch by the time she gets out of her vehicle.

"Good morning," she says. She doesn't meet my gaze.

I don't need her to. I have all of her neat features memorized. Her eyes a whiskey color, her hair dark brown, straight and shiny. Today she has it in two braids that make my hands itch.

I could grab hold of both and pull hard, forcing her head back as I...

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No. I need to get my head on straight. I don't like feeling like I'm out of control. Obviously. Everything in my life is about control. She's the one thing that takes me back to a time when I didn't feel like I had that. The one thing that makes me feel like I'm standing on the edge of a precipice and I might get pushed off or, hell, I might jump.

I don't like it. Not one bit.

"The floors need to be done today," I say. "And windows."

She blinks. "Windows?"

"Inside. Not outside. And not the ones in the living room. You're not getting on a ladder or anything. The bedroom windows, though. All the supplies should be in there. I figure you know how to do chores."

"That's something I definitely know how to do."

The truth is, I have a cleaning service come once a month and do a deep clean. And I also generally have a housekeeper. I know what I'm good at. And I know what I'm not good at. I'm not good at keeping up on the day-to-day. I have enough money to cover up my weaknesses, and so I do that. What I'm doing with her... It's a game.

But it's the only way that I can play it, and I'm well aware of that. This is the only way she's going to let me forgive her dad's debt, the only way that she's going to feel secure in it. And I'd be lying if I didn't admit that there's also something... Something like adrenaline that I'm getting out of this. Like I'm testing myself.

Testing if maybe I'm actually a decent person, or not.

The jury is out.

She goes inside and I head out. I get my truck and drive over to the barn. And I know that she doesn't think that I have a real, working ranch, but I do. The horse breeding program is small, but it's functioning. I don't do any of this for money. I've established a billion-dollar conglomerate that I'm on the verge of buying myself out of. Liquidating as much of my assets as possible, and setting myself up to live here. I don't need to grind all the time. I've been doing it my whole life. It'll be interesting to experience life without that.

Of course, I'll be by myself. That's what happens when you don't have family and every friendship you've ever made is transactional, or based around a shared kink.

But I'll have the money to travel wherever I want to go. To do whatever makes sense to me. To not work so damned hard, like I'm still running from the gutter.

That's some kind of freedom. And I know that I should just be grateful for it. I spent enough of my life scrapping for survival.

I'll be the kind of rich prick I always dreamed of being. And eventually, I'll be an older version of myself, still trawling clubs for kink with no attachments, and it'll all start seem a little creepy.

The future is bright.

I can also double down and keep working on this ranch. Maybe I'll build it up into something bigger. Right now, it's manageable mainly with just me. That's what I want.

I have a monster of a company already. I don't need it to get all that much more intense. One day at a time. That's one thing I've been good at for a long time. Survival.

I head down to the far north pasture and drive along the fence line, making sure there are no weak points. Then I head to the stables, and rotate through the horses, make sure each of them gets a good workout.

After about two hours, I hear the distinct chime of the Club app from my phone.

The adrenaline kick that spikes in my blood surprises me.

I don't usually get this edgy about it. But it's been too long since I've done a scene.

I don't know if I'm testing myself or what by not just flying somebody out here. I don't know why I'm playing games with this sub who clearly is scared to pull the trigger.

But here I am. Games for days.

In every aspect of my life. I open the app up, and click on her message.

If we were to do a scene, what would we do?

God dammit. I feel myself getting hard just thinking about it. I've never seen a picture of her. We haven't traded any physical descriptions or anything like that. I don't know how old she is. I don't know anything except she's new at this.

But she told me last night what she's interested in. And it's so, so easy for me to imagine the scene in my head. Of course, without features for this woman, it's far too easy for me to put Avery in her place. Naked, on her knees in front of me, her hair in

braids. Just like it was when I saw her two hours before. She would look good in rope. Just thinking about it makes me hard.

I decide to go ahead and use it for fantasy fuel for this exchange with the sub.

First off, I would take my time undressing you. Then I'd have to get a good look at you to decide exactly how I want to bind you. But we would start with something simple. Something that takes time, but doesn't push you too hard. Something that makes you feel helpless. That's what you want, isn't it?

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I don't always get instant responses from her, so I'm surprised when I do this time.

Yes.

Whether or not we fuck is up to you.

I'm fine doing a scene that doesn't include fucking, though obviously I prefer it. But as hesitant and inexperienced as this woman is, I want to be careful.

I want to.

My cock is aching at this point and there something in the denial that I like, and I'm not usually into denial for myself. Though, denial for a submissive can be that way for me. It's just usually I'm getting to witness their torture too.

Hard limits?

This takes her a little bit longer.

I can't think of how to say this right.

You have to be clear and explicit, there's no room for being squeamish. If you want to play consent games you need to be abundantly clear about what your limits are.

It's always important, but never more important than when a scene might involve her resistance as a feature.

It takes a long time for the next message to come in.

I've never had anal and I don't think I want to.

I stare at the sentence. I ought to send her away with a virtual pat on the head. She's out of her depth, and so I am I. If that's the thing she had trouble saying...This just won't work.

I should tell her to forget it. It's not that I need that or anything, it's just that this girl hasn't done any experimenting as far as I can tell if that's the one hard limit she can come up with and she's never done it.

I don't know how old she is. I'm thinking of her as a girl because it's clear to me she's got no real concept of what she's signing up for.

And so I list them out.

Everything I can think of. Things I'm not even into, things that go past my hard limits, even as an experienced Dom, because I need her to understand that she's stepping into a whole world where the only limit on possibility is you. And you have to be very clear about how far you're willing to go.

I probably scared her off and it's probably for the best.

I put my phone back in my pocket and start to head back into the barn.

My pocket chimes again. I take the phone out.

I don't mind pain. Or dubious consent. Some of those things are a not right now. And some of them are a probably never.

I'm mad that I'm relieved she's still in.

Fair enough. We'll start with what you're comfortable with.

What's obvious to me is that this is already pushing her boundaries.

I would have a safe word, right?

I take a sharp breath.

Anytime you're experimenting with sex there should be a safe word. Any guy who doesn't offer you that doesn't know what he's doing.

I'm the one who doesn't know what I'm doing.

I do.

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I know better than to push. I know that if I leave it here, she's going to come to me. And when she does, I'll do a more clear map of what I think would be a good starting scene for her. I don't want to give everything away, necessarily. But there's a fine line between expectation and rehearsal like it's a performance. And a lot of people like performance. That's just not me. I don't do this in a club for a reason. I have, but I don't get off on being watched. It's the practice for me. The meditation.

And the pleasure.

I can't pretend the pleasure doesn't have a lot to do with it.

I don't want to go back to the house right now, not while Avery still there and my mind is on this, but I have a 3 o'clock business call I have to take and it's going to be on video so I need to be in my office. I finish up with the horses, and head back toward the house. Thankfully, when I go inside I don't see her. I make my way upstairs to my office and I'm about to get started on the video call when the next message comes in.

I want to meet.

Fuck.

I can't respond to her right now. Because I have to do this phone call and I really never resented this business that pulled me out of poverty more.

The entire time, I'm thinking about her. And as I listen to the general droning of the call I start slowly typing out a response on my phone. It's not that this doesn't matter

to me. It does. But it won't soon. I'm going to be hands-off and only involved anymore as a shareholder, and once that happens, I'll be free of bullshit like this.

I didn't get into development because I love it. I got into it because I was good at it and because I could make a lot of money doing it.

People say that money doesn't buy you happiness, but those people have never been fucking homeless because they didn't have the money.

If they did, then they would understand that money is pretty much the only thing that makes you happy.

But I'm busy constructing a scene to see if she'll agree to it. She wants to meet, and I need to make it clear I'll train her and I'll be careful, but it is going to be a full-on scene. Again, I'm imagining it in my head, and it's Avery. Tied up and helpless, laying on the bed on her knees, her ass in the air. Powerless to do anything as I...

No. That's enough.

"Thank you for sharing all of this," I say. "It was a productive meeting. I will see you all next quarter."

I end it then and walk out of the room, finishing the last few words in the message, and then I hit send. And as I stand there in the hallway, from behind a closed door I hear the sound of the Club app chiming.

I freeze, everything in my body stopping. Going still. Is it possible that what I think just happened... Happened?

In my head, this little sub has been Avery the entire time, yearning to be instructed,

yearning to be taken in hand, but I thought that was my fucking perverse imagination. My completely inappropriate obsession with the woman next door.

Now I think it might've been an instinct that I was ignoring.

One that I was telling myself I couldn't trust, because after all, you want to question your instincts when you think that the object of your obsession might have kinks that line up perfectly with your own.

No. It wasn't a good thing. It was actually the worst case scenario. It was her...

The door opens and she comes out, her eyes connecting with mine and her mouth dropping open. She gasps. "Oh. Sorry. I didn't... I didn't know you were here."

"You didn't think I'd be in my house?"

"I mean, it's your house," she says. "Of course."

My playroom is behind her and she's backlit perfectly by all the windows. I like that room because of all the natural light, and it's also more of an oasis than my actual bedroom. It's a place where only encounters happened and it's the closest thing I have to a retreat. If she had any idea she would run away screaming.

Or maybe not.

I'm already questioning what I think I heard. Questioning everything.

She swallows, and moves past me. "Did you want me to clean your office?"

"Sure," I say.

I wonder if she's been in there yet. At all. If she's seen what the books on my shelves are, many of them guides and schools of thought to BDSM and different techniques. I'm a completist in everything that I do. And when I'm interested in something, I'm all in. If I don't care about it, I can't make myself read even one sentence about it. But this? It's pretty much the defining interest of my life. The amount of books I have on ropes and knot tying is probably pathological.

But then, I'm pretty fucking pathological.

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She slips past me and goes into the office and I turn away from her and start to head toward the stairs. And that's when the chime goes off on my phone. I stop.

It was loud enough for her to hear, I know that for sure.

I turn around just as she comes out of my office, her face pale and waxen, her mouth partway open. "I..."

My phone is in my hand, and I open up the message that I know she's just sent me.

Yes, please.

I look up, and make direct eye contact with her. "Well hello, Dove."

Chapter Four

Avery

I've died a thousand deaths in the last five seconds.

In each of those deaths, I'm subjected to the cruelest of torture, and I would rather be living those experiences than standing here right now.

I'm... I've been messaging Caleb Flynn the entire time.

He's The Duke.

He's... A Dom.

I am freaking out. My entire brain is having some kind of hyper connected implosion. Because there's no way. It's too coincidental. I'm torn between two competing ideas. The first is that he set all of this up. Maybe even all the way back. Planting a seed of some kind of submissive need in me that day that he grabbed my wrist and scolded me, and made me want to kneel before him.

That he knew he was messaging me the entire time, that he lured me into cleaning his house so that he could get me right where he wanted me – and the horrible realization that I might just be drawn to him because there's something in me that needs what he has.

That the reason I feel like fighting him and throwing myself at him at the same time is that he has always been the answer to this thing inside of me.

That he has always been my damnation and salvation all at the same time.

"No," I say.

"Of course," he says. "It makes sense."

"No. I... It doesn't make sense."

"Yes it does. You know it does."

"You had to know," I say, because I need to make the accusation. I need to say it. I need to know.

"I did not know that I was messaging you," he says.

“That can’t be true. I don’t believe you.”

The hot flame that flares in his blue eyes silences me. “If that’s what you think, then you can leave.”

“What?”

“I mean it. You get the fuck out. Because I’m not going to have you working in this house when you distrust me to that degree, and I’m sure as hell not doing this with you.”

“What makes you think that I would do this with you?”

“Oh, you were happier to be with a stranger than you are to be with me?”

I feel so vulnerable then. Stripped absolutely bare. He is the only person who knows this about me. Not a single other soul knows these intimate details about my fantasies. Truth be told, he basically found out the substance of them along with me. And that makes me feel so angry. So raw and vulnerable. It makes me wish that I were dead. I’ve nobody to talk to about this. Because I would have to tell my friend Monica that I even want to do this in the first place, and she would think that something was wrong with me, and...

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He is the only person in the world who knows this about me.

I feel cut down by that. I feel reduced. I'm angry, and I want to lash out. The whole time, it was him.

I am a jumble of feeling. And the worst, most shameful feeling is the excitement that's burning inside of me. Those words that he just sent me were the most erotic thing I've ever read in my life. And I am screwed up. Absolutely twisted in the head. Because the hottest thing a man has ever said to me is that he wants to tie me up so that I can't move while he fucks me, and I want it. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything else, and it's him.

And that makes it better and worse. It's like he alone has the key to a lock inside of me and we are both so aware of it now.

I despise it and him.

And I'm drawn to him all the same. In spite of it or because of it, it doesn't really matter.

"I mean it. If you think I was fucking with you to that degree, you don't trust me enough to do this."

I do believe him. I'm just so... Furious about it. At the universe, I guess. Or maybe God is punishing me for being a kinky slut. I've never really believed that, but right now I kind of feel like it. I also feel desperately, horrifically turned on, which makes me question if what I actually have is a humiliation kink. Because God knows I am so

embarrassed I want to die.

But you know the same things about him. You know what he likes. That he likes power. Control. That he likes to tie women up.

It's true. I do know that. I don't find anything shameful in it, because it's something that I find hot.

And that's when the world turns upside down for me.

He doesn't think it shameful that I want to submit to him. Because he needs women to do that.

The heat of my humiliation begins to dissipate. I'm still shocked, I'm still thrown completely off guard, but I don't feel horrified. Not in the way that I did a moment ago. Not scalded and like he's going to judge me. He can't. I'm the other side of his coin. He needs me. Women like me. And you need a man like him.

"Do you believe me or not?" His prompt is hard and there's a hidden command beneath the surface of those words, one that I'm incapable of denying.

"I believe you."

"Is the Club the first experience that you've had with BDSM?"

I shake my head. "I mean I... I've looked at other services. Clubs. I've watched... I watch a lot of porn."

He shakes his head. "That's not necessarily going to tell you anything."

"It told me enough," I say.

“What did it tell you?”

“That is what I wanted. I...” I try to take a breath and try to stop sounding so timid and tentative. “It made me sure that I wanted to be dominated.”

“You haven’t done it before.”

“No. I made that pretty clear in my profile.”

“You did. But in my experience a lot of times new submissive have tried to get their partners to engage in domination with them before they seek out an inexperienced Dominant. So a lot of times what they have is a little taste of it from someone who didn’t know what they were doing.”

“I don’t even have a taste of it,” I say. “You know who my ex-boyfriend is.”

I know he knows him. And it really is unfair of me to bring John into this. But he was just another person in my life who needed to take from me. And in the end, even though he said he loved me, even though he said he wanted to be with me, I couldn’t do it. Not anymore.

It was just one more unbearable responsibility. And I don’t know what love is supposed to be like – love isn’t what’s on my mind at the moment. But I know what I can’t handle any more of.

The problem is, I want this. I want it so badly. I want him. The truth is, I’ve always wanted him. But I’m conflicted about that, because everything else about him is so... It’s difficult for me.

But he is the one that awakened this need in me all those years ago. The need that I didn’t even have a name for. And now it’s possible. I... I don’t even know what to do

with that.Say yes.

“How long have you been...”

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He lifts a brow, reaches up, and takes his cowboy hat off his head. He's stunning. I've always known that, but I try not to look directly at it. Because it makes me feel funny and wrong. Because he makes me feel like I am hurtling toward my doom in more ways than one. Because it's so much more comfortable to hate him rather than acknowledge that there's something much darker and more dangerous underlying my negative feelings for him.

Maybe it's actually perfect. But I do feel antagonism toward him. Maybe it would make it hotter. Fuel it in an even more delicious way. That's so messed up. But isn't all of this?

"I'm an expert," he says. "And lucky for you. Because if you're going to do this you do not want an inexperienced rigger."

I know enough terminology to know that a rigger is the person who does the tying and the model is the one who has the rope work done on her. And I'm very clear about which side of the fence I want to be on. I'm very clear about the fact that I want to be the one who isn't in control for once.

I suddenly feel every bit of our age gap. He's had years of experience with BDSM. He has this whole life away from here. I know that, I'm very aware of it, and I use it to invalidate the kind of ranch work that he does. To turn him into someone who doesn't deserve to own pieces of our land, but I've never really sat with what it means. That he knows more than me. That he's experienced a hell of a lot more of everything than me.

That he has something to teach me.

My palms are starting to feel damp, but then, I'm wet between my legs, too, and that has nothing to do with fear. Or maybe it does have a little bit to do with fear.

I'm not immune to the attraction created by fear, clearly. And for me, the two are pretty closely linked.

I have a shared language with him, and that surprises me. I might not know even a fraction of what he does, but I know it. And no one else here does. Not as far as I know, and I'm not going to go walk into a bar, throw a dart, and ask some man to tie me up. For all the reasons he just said, but also...

I look up at him.

He is the reason I feel this way. I know it. He's a catastrophic event in my life. He changed me the moment that he touched me, and it shouldn't have been sexual. I know that it shouldn't. But it was. It changed something fundamentally inside of me and I don't know how to change it back. I've never known that. Well, I tried.

I got with the nicest guy I could find. One that fit into my actual life. One that matched the tone. I'm the one who runs everything. I'm the one who does everything. It stands to reason that I would fit into a relationship that way, but it didn't work for me.

There's this deep part of myself that feels so unsatisfied. That feels so exhausted. And if I run from him now, what I might even running back to?

He's now the keeper of my secrets. Secrets that no one else knows.

And it's this strange dichotomy, because I don't like him— quite the opposite. But because of that I suppose I don't have to please him.

Liar.

Well, that's complicated too. I want to please him. I want him to use me. I want to be used. I want him to control everything. To make me feel things. I want to not have to work. I'm suddenly so desperately exhausted by all of it that this seems like a good thing. It seems like something reasonable.

It's different, somehow. He doesn't have an expectation of me. When I imagine telling one of my friends about this, all I can see his judgment. And I know full well that John couldn't have handled it. Wouldn't have been able to do it.

But he can.

I already know. We've already had the conversation. The exchange.

Yeah. Make it about that, and not the fact that he's the one you want.

I can't deny that. My body's response to him, especially now the shock is wearing off, is so intense it frightens me. But fear is what I'm looking for.

The sense of danger and recklessness. This intense and brilliant thing.

At least, I think it is. I think.

"Maybe we found a new way that I can pay my debt," I say.

The idea of that shocks me, even as it arouses me.

God. Thinking about him forcing me to be with him to pay the money back... Why does that excite me like this? This isn't a game. It's not a chat, it's not a fantasy, I am literally offering to trade him my body and I'm getting turned on by it. This is

fuckedup in an unreasonable way, but I already said it. The words came out of my mouth. There's nothing that I can do about it now.

I don't want to.

I'm throbbing between my legs and my nipples are so tight and sensitive every shift of fabric over them, even through my bra, sends an electric charge through my body.

I watch as his pupils expand, a muscle in his jaw jumping. "Is that what you think this is?"

“Yes. A transaction. An exchange.”

“I don’t have to pay for sex.”

He looks offended, insulted, and I realize that I might’ve said the wrong thing. Even as the fantasy of it all is tearing me up inside, turning me on.

“I just meant that...”

“Are you trying to make a scene? Because you don’t just get to set the tone. And you definitely don’t get to try and manipulate all this so that you get to be in charge.”

“That’s not what I was doing,” I say. “I just...” Without thinking, I take my shirt off, let him see the shape of my nipples through my nearly see-through lace bralette. And then I unsnap my jeans and push them down my hips. I don’t usually wear sexy underwear, but because of the conversation I was having with – with him – in the app, I had done it. Because I wanted to feel aroused through the whole day. Because I wanted to keep playing the game.

What I want to do is push him past this point. Push both of us past it. I’m tired of lingering in this uncertainty. I know that a whole bunch of it was mine. But if I had moved quicker, if I hadn’t been engaged in this agreement with him, the end result would’ve been the same. If I would’ve reached out to him on the app and then agreed to meet him, we would still be standing here. I’ve reached a point of no return, and I know that I can’t go back. I know that I need for this to happen.

I can’t move on with my life if I don’t do this.

If I've at least done it once, then I can find it again. I'll figure myself out. Or maybe I'll get it out of my system. Maybe I'm not a submissive. Maybe I just have a sexual fantasy and that fantasy needs to be satisfied. But I won't know if I don't do it. And this is the best way.

To really, really satisfy it.

"You are pushing," he says. "And that's what tells me that you're not actually ready for this."

"No," I say, desperate. "I am. I am ready for it. You said that you liked to train submissives. Train me. Teach me."

I'm begging him.

My legs are shaking. I'm exposed already, not just because I took my clothes off. Because he knows what I want. He might know what I want better than I do, and it's galling to know that.

That this man who I've hated for so many years has access to something deep inside of me that I don't fully understand.

He does.

That's the point of finding a good Dom. At least, that's what I've learned from all of my research. It's why I landed on The Club as my way of doing this. I need him to know better than me.

I drop down slowly to my knees and I look up at him, my heart pounding so hard I think I might die.

My pride is in the basement. It's shattered.

But then it was shattered the moment I realized he was the one I was messaging. The moment he realized who I was. Because I've already uncovered all my darkest fantasies for him.

I've already said it. Why hold anything back now?

What am I even trying to preserve? He could reject me – and he could do it with more precision than any other man could.

The floor is hard and cold, and I'm hot all over. Trembling. Waiting.

I want to say something else. To appeal to him. To look at him. Instead I stare at the floor and I sit in my own discomfort.

I'm in control, always. Life is uncomfortable and unpredictable and the way I cope with that is to keep moving, to keep taking charge. Barreling through every moment of uncertainty and discomfort in my body and around me.

I don't do that now. I stare at the ground and feel everything.

The weight of his gaze on me, the way my heart throbs. How slick I am between my legs in spite of the burning humiliation of the moment. The desperate uncertainty.

I can't make him want me.

I can't do anything but wait.

Then, he touches me. His hand on my head, and I shiver, the tremor going through my entire body as his hand slides down my face, as he moves his thumb and

forefinger to cup my chin. Then he tilts my face up.

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I keep my eyes downcast, panic soaring through my breast, my heart fluttering like a trapped bird.

“Look at me.”

His tone is commanding, rough, and I can’t deny him.

My eyes lock with his and my heart almost bursts, my breath going short and sharp, my body throbbing with anticipation. Need.

Sex has never been this good. The closest I’ve come – ever – to being this turned on is when I’m alone, building fantasies in my own mind, but then I have total control. I’m creating the map toward my own pleasure.

Not here. Not now.

I try to get control of my breathing as I look at him, trembling beneath his gaze. He might tell me to leave. I might die if he does.

If he doesn’t?

I have no idea.

“You need a safe word, Dove,” he says, reverting to my app name.

I’m shaking uncontrollably and trying to hide it. If I speak, my voice will give me away but I know I have to.

A safe word. I asked him about that in the app, before I knew it was Caleb. It shouldn't feel harder now that I know it is. But it does. It being Caleb has changed everything. Made it sharper. More dangerous.

Hotter.

"H-halt." It's the only thing I can think of. It's how I tell my horse to stop when I need him to. It's ingrained in me as a way to stop whatever is happening, and I know I'll need something that doesn't require a lot of thought.

"If you need the word, use it. Don't put me in a position where I'm doing something you aren't comfortable with. This is about trust. If you don't trust me, you shouldn't do this. If I can't trust you, I can't give you what you want."

I nod. "I know."

"Oh," he says, his lips curving into a smile. "You know? You know because you watched some porn and did some reading? You know." He releases his hold on my chin, and I'm not sure if I'm allowed to keep looking at him or not, but I do, my heart still thundering erratically. "Dove, I'm going to tell you something right now. You don't know anything."

My throat goes dry. I want to argue with him, because it's what I'd normally do. Just a couple of days ago I was mouthing off to him in my driveway and now I'm half naked on my knees in front of him, knowing I have to surrender.

I don't have to. I can leave. Any time.

But I'll never know.

He's right.

Research is just information. I don't know what it feels like to give my body to someone like this. I don't know what surrender feels like.

I've never done it a day in my life. I came out of the womb crying – the most cantankerous unpleasant baby on record, according to my mom. And I've been fighting every day since.

“I understand,” I say. “Sir.”

I know to call him that from my research, so he can't say I know nothing.

There's something that flairs in his eyes— desire, I think. I hope. I don't actually know if he wants me or if he's just agreeing to my training because it's what he does.

Then his hand moves to my hair, and he grips it. Tight.

“I didn't tell you to call me that,” he says, his words hard. “What you'll learn is to do what you're told. Now, get up and go into the bedroom and wait for me. If you get impatient and look around the room, I'll know. If you take your clothes off before I get to you, I will punish you. If you touch yourself, you'll wish you hadn't.”

I can stop it now. I can stop it at any time, I know I can. I have the word and everything.

But what I know about myself is that if I obey him now, I'll be in too deep to ever admit defeat. I either run now, or I'm all in.

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I stand slowly and I turn away from him, beginning to walk toward the bedroom. I don't have to ask him which one. I know now.

It's the soft one with all the windows. It doesn't look like a dungeon, but I suddenly think that's the point.

Then suddenly I'm immobilized, his large hand reaching out and grabbing me by the back of the neck, pulling me back toward him as he turns me so I'm facing him, those blue eyes boring straight through me.

I wonder for a moment if he'll kiss me.

He doesn't.

"Dove," he says. "You'll call me Wolf. Because I'm your alpha now."

Wolf.

All the better to eat me. And he's going to devour me, I just know it.

I'm in over my head. This is so fucked up. It's just so fucked up.

But I am too.

I do my best to nod with his hand holding me fast. And when I answer him my voice doesn't shake. "Yes, Wolf."

Chapter Five

Avery

When he releases me, I walk forward into the bedroom and he shuts the door behind me, leaving me alone. The silence presses in on me, oppressive in a way I can't describe.

I avoid silence. It's part of avoiding stillness. There's always music, movement, something to do or think about so that I don't have to be in my own skin. In my own life.

Not here. Not now. I look around the room and the hardware on the bedframe suddenly makes sense. He's into bondage and he probably uses it to secure his subs to the bed.

He's had other subs here.

I feel like that should comfort me. In some ways it does. In others, it serves as a sobering reminder for what this is. I conveniently match his kink. But he would happily have any woman who does.

A weird thing to be upset about, since you're the same.

Any Dom would do. Or so I told myself when I signed up for the app.

Now as I stand in the center of the room—the sun shining through the windows, the trees swaying in the breeze outside, goosebumps rising up on my arms, my breathing coming in shallow, even bursts—I wonder if that's true at all.

I close my eyes and listen.

I breathe in, then out, and I hear a sound rise up in the silence of the room. Quiet music that would sound right in a spa, and not a sex dungeon.

Of course, while I've never been in a sex dungeon, this isn't the black velvet, red silk, manacles, and chains I'd have assumed I'd find in one.

Soft bedding, natural light and ambient music is a surprise.

You think you know anything...

The door opens behind me and I feel my whole body go tense, my posture straightening as I react to his nearness.

My heart is beating so hard I'm sure that he can hear it.

I expect him to say something. To move to me. To touch me.

Wolf.

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I think about that word, and all that it means. I think about how dangerous he feels – how dangerous he’s always felt. The wolf in the woods who eats young women for breakfast – how very fitting. I remember reading somewhere that the wolf in fairy tales is a metaphor for predatory men who want to steal women’s chastity.

And those stories were meant to teach women to run away. To protect themselves. Protect their virtue. It’s a special kind of idiocy to put yourself right in the path of the ravening beast, I think.

But here I am.

He moves almost silently, and I sneak a glance and realize he’s taken his boots off. His hat is gone too. He walks to the dresser and turns on a diffuser, a cloud of vapor rising up out of it as a faint lavender scent fills the room.

He opens a drawer, the slide almost silent, and I watch him as he takes out three coils of red rope and sets them on the surface of the dresser. I remember what he sent me in the text.

He said that for our first scene he wants to tie my hands and arms, and make it so I can’t move. Make it so I can’t escape him when he takes me.

In my imagination, that was a hot, furtive, desperate act, but watching him now as the music swells around us, chimes and strings and sounds designed to soothe, not frighten, it feels incongruous.

He picks up one of the coils of rope, moving his hands over it methodically, as if he’s

testing the length and the weight of it. Need slams into me, hot and hard. I want him to touch me. This is torture. This makes me feel like running away. Looking at Caleb Flynn—the man I’ve sworn to hate for all eternity—barefoot and handling that rope while he looks at me in my underwear—planning, watching, calculating—is the single most out-of-body experience I’ve ever had.

At the same time, I feel oppressively in my body. I feel like I’m so aware of every part of myself I want to unzip my skin and run away.

Instead I stand rooted to the spot. Waiting.

He sent me his physical plans, but there’s still so much I don’t know. Will he talk to me? Roleplay? Will he kiss me?

I want to kiss him. I want to lean in and have him wrap his arms around me. Get familiar with the taste of him, touching him.

He moves closer to me and for one moment I think that might be what he means to do.

Then he reaches behind me, takes a hold of my braid and tugs. Hard. “Down,” he says. “On your knees.”

I obey without a second thought, the pleasure/pain intersection where he’s holding my braid tight has my chest tight and my clit throbbing with need. My eyes water as I make it all the way down to where he’s ordered me. He releases his hold on my hair and it falls heavy down my back.

“Good,” he says, his tone low and almost soothing. Reassuring. That puts me even more on edge, because he’s never been soothing or reassuring to me in my life.

He moves around behind me and I look down at his feet as he does. He pauses and undoes the clasp on my bra, letting it fall loose down my arms. Then he continues the slow rotation around me, coming to the front and pulling it away, a low growl reverberating in the back of his throat as he tugs it free, leaving me exposed to him.

Then suddenly I'm being lifted up off the ground and my instinct is to thrash against him, to fight as he pulls me against his rock hard chest. I'm not scared, and I don't want to use my safe word, but I want to resist him. I want to do something with the overwhelming energy building inside of me.

And this feels right.

His arms are uncompromising. They might as well be made of iron. I'm so weak against him, like that night he caught me on his property and took hold of me, holding me fast. It all blends together – that night and now – and I manage to wiggle up over his shoulder and then find myself crashing down onto the mattress, his big body over the top of mine, his hands pinning my wrists down to the mattress.

“You can fight all you want, Dove. It's not going to get you anywhere.”

He pauses then. Waiting. I know he's waiting for me to use the word. Giving space to the fact that the game took a turn, but I told him already I wanted this. I really had no idea how much I wanted it.

He's so hot hard and over me, and I arch up against him, feeling his hard cock against my thigh as he pushes me down deep into the mattress. Then he rises up and grabs my braid with one hand, his other hand splayed on my hip as he turns me over onto my stomach. I make it easy for him, moving with him as I instinctively try to minimize the pain from him pulling my hair.

My heart beats hard against the mattress, against my breastbone.

“I can’t do this to you on the floor,” he says, moving away from me. “Yet. You don’t have the stamina for it. Hold still.”

I can feel him get off the bed. My cheek is resting against the mattress, I can’t see him, but I can hear him moving.

He grips the back of my underwear and drags them down my legs, a satisfied sound in the back of his throat making me squirm. He wraps his arm around my waist and lifts me up slightly, and I try to follow his lead, my face still on the mattress, my ass in the air.

“Like that,” he says. “Let me see that pussy.”

I widen my stance just slightly and hope I’m doing what he wants. God, how weird is it that I want to please him?

“I’m going to bind your hands,” he says.

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I've been imagining it like calf roping. Like he'd jump right in and bind me in seconds, then take me, but for some reason now I'm beginning to understand it isn't going to go that way. It's taken this long for him to get me on the bed. His every movement is methodical.

Panic flutters in my breast as part of me feels compelled to keep pushing, to make it go faster. So that I know everything will be okay. That I'm fine and I survived it. Liked it. Did it. Can check it off my list.

Suddenly I feel myself descending into a panic spiral.

"Stop thinking," he says.

The words are short, sharp. Direct.

"I..."

"I said stop, Dove." He puts his knee on the mattress and leans forward, over me, and I can feel his hard denim-covered cock pressing against my ass as he reaches forward and takes hold of my hand, drawing it tight against my back, and then my other hand, pulling both back so they're resting against the dip in my spine just above my rear. "You can relax." He curves his arm around my waist and guides me so I'm kneeling on the mattress now. "You're not going to do anything. You aren't going to move. You're just going to let me do what I want, understand?"

"Yes," I say. "Wolf."

He leans in and I feel a sharp, hot sting when he bites me on the shoulder, just hard enough that I feel a graze of pain that echoes from where his teeth touched me down between my legs. “Holding the position might get uncomfortable. Even on the mattress, your legs are going to start falling asleep. Don’t focus on the discomfort, focus on me.”

He gets off the bed and I can feel he’s standing behind me now. He touches my shoulder with something. “This is the rope I’m going to use to tie you.” It’s softer than I expected it to be. Again I think my thoughts were informed by lassoes and cowboys, and this is something else entirely.

The rope slides over my skin and around my rib cage, just beneath my breasts. “I’m not going to check in with you the whole time, I prefer not to talk while I’m doing the rigging, so you need to tell me if something is out of your comfort zone, understand?”

I don’t tell him I’m too stubborn to use the safe word he gave me. That I’d rather be miserable the whole time than give in. It’s how I live my life. I’ll just do it, and eventually you get through it, no matter how bad it is. I’m not going to start complaining now.

He pulls on my braid. Hard. “I asked you a question.”

“Y-yes,” I say. “I understand.”

That satisfies him and he continues his methodical work with the rope. He loops it up over my shoulders, around my breasts, and I don’t know if it’s placebo or not but it feels like they get more sensitive from the tightness around them and I feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff.

Maybe even the cliff on the drive up here that looks down over my ranch. I’m above myself. Outside myself. Waiting to see what will happen next, with fear and

anticipation, and also balancing on the knife's edge of arousal. Every movement of his hands on my body, the rope on my skin, digs the blade in deeper. My clit feels swollen, and he hasn't even touched me intimately.

He's fully dressed, his hands almost deliberately not touching my breasts, my pussy, my ass as he works. And yet I'm hotter than I've ever been, caught in this space of surreal discomfort and desire.

I want him to touch me. I'm getting wetter and wetter between my legs, anticipation building so intensely I can hardly breathe.

I squeeze my thighs together, as tight as I can, to try and get some relief—to feel something.

“Stop,” he says, his voice hard. “You don't get to pleasure yourself.”

“I-I'm not.”

He reaches around and grips my face, turning my head to the side and leaning in so he can look me in the eye. “Don't lie to me.”

“But I...”

“Sit. Still. This takes time. And I aim to take my time.” I whimper, the feeling between my legs almost painful now. “It hurts, doesn't it?” he asks.

I nod.

“Answer me,” he says.

I want to argue, and tell him he said he didn't like talking while he did this, but my

mouth and my stubbornness have already gotten me in trouble and I have a feeling I actually won't like what he'll do if I keep pushing him. Not because I think he'll hurt me, because I think he'll deny me what I really want. The more I push, the longer he's going to take, I can already feel that.

It's a terrible, wonderful, horrible thing for someone with my level of impatience.

But for some reason this was what I wanted. To see what it would be like to surrender to another person.

"Yes," I say. "It hurts."

“Why?”

“Because I...I want you.”

“Where do you want me?” he asks, the deep, gruff satisfaction in his voice setting off a chain reaction in my body.

“Inside me,” I say.

“That’s going to take a long time,” he says. “If I let you have it at all.”

I want to cry. The idea that I might have to go through all this and still not have him? I realize then how successfully he’s fucked my mind without coming close to fucking my body. An hour ago, I would have said I hated him. Now I’m ready to beg for him to take me.

“I don’t want this,” I said, whispering. “I didn’t want to want it.”

Somehow, I know that that’s the right thing to say. It rings a bell inside me, and I swear I can feel it echo inside him.

“That’s too damn bad, isn’t it?”

“You did this to me,” I say.

He did. He did it that night all those years ago, whether he knows it or not. He made me into this. Made me want it. Made me want him. Awakened this kink inside me

and led me here to this moment, to his bed, to his ropes.

“Little sub, I haven’t even begun to do things to you.”

He tightens the ropes, and I suck in a sharp breath, which lets him make them tighter. It isn’t painful yet. Do I want it to be?

He draws the ropes around my back, pressing his large palm between my shoulder blades. I feel another length of rope cross beneath the upper part of my arms, as he holds them at the wrist, hard against my lower back. I feel him press the end of the rope beneath the ropes that are already binding around my rib cage, lacing it through before wrapping my arms. It’s like meditation, or at least, I think it’s like what meditation could be. I’ve never done it, personally.

I never sit still like this.

But the way that he’s touching me, holding me, balancing me in a way that’s both calming and invigorating, is putting me in such a strange space. One that I’ve never been to before.

I don’t know what he’s doing, but it isn’t fast. There are a lot of passes of rope that don’t appear to do anything, and then he’ll loop another length around my arms, tightening them together even further and holding them in place. I lose track of the time. I lose track of everything. My body is suspended in a hyper aroused state, my pussy throbbing, still begging for his touch.

And yet again, those deft fingers move nowhere near any intimate place on my body, and yet the entire experience is more intimate than anything I’ve ever experienced before.

Time ticks by. It could be minutes. It could quite literally be hours. The only thing

that gives me any indicator is the change of the sun outside the window. The light shifting so that it's coming from another direction. Deepening into a more golden color.

The wind blows through the trees and the shadows on the bed weave new shapes in time with it.

He pulls tight on the ropes, drawing my shoulders back, wrenching my breasts forward, my hands now bound entirely to my waist behind my back, with me completely unable to move. And then, he introduces another rope. This one goes through my braid, weaving in with my hair, until it joins the rope moving down the center of my back, my head now tilted back just slightly, my scalp tingling with the painful sensation.

"Fuck," he breathes. "You look beautiful. I want to take your picture."

We haven't discussed that, which I have a feeling is the only reason why he's telling me now, rather than just doing it.

"You can do whatever you want," I say.

Not permission, but not my safe word. I want to keep the resistance in play. I'm not sure how I feel about him taking my picture, but I also don't want to pull back now. I don't want to stop any of this. I'm on display for him, and the feeling of being trapped that way while he decides to document it whatever way he wants to is thrilling and terrifying all at once.

He takes my picture, the phone makes that camera sound, and I have a feeling it's deliberate. So that I know. So that I'm aware that he's taking photographs of my naked, bound back.

He comes around to the front, and our eyes meet for the first time in a while. I feel so vulnerable, I can't cover myself. I can't do anything to shield my body from his gaze. My breasts are on full display, and he takes my picture there too. Then he moves forward, grabbing hold of my knees, forcing them apart so that he gets a clear view of my bare pussy. "Look down," he says.

I obey, and I hear him taking more photos. "I like to document my work," he says.

Heat pours through me, a strange, thrilling sort of shame. I'm just his work. He's interested in the ropes, much more so than he is me. And I don't know why that is both a turn on as well as humiliating. "Now I'm going to put you to work," he says. "Because that got me hard. And you need to take care of it."

My breathing starts to come in short, sharp bursts. I need him. Need to touch him, and that's something I've been denied up until now. But of course my hands are bound. There's nothing that I can do. I watch as he strips his shirt off with one hand, revealing his body to me for the first time. God damn. He's the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. His muscles are sculpted, his abs like something off of an online thirst trap account. He's not waxed. He's got hair over those muscles, a reminder that he's a man in a way my ex wasn't. As if my current situation wasn't a reminder of that.

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He moves his hands to his belt buckle. And I watch as he works it free with one hand, drawing the belt through the loops and then undoing the button on his jeans, lowering the zipper.

He reaches into his underwear and pulls out his thick, heavy cock. It's the biggest I've ever seen, including my online pornography research, and that really is saying something.

He reaches behind me and grabs the ropes, drawing me forward, his large hand wrapped around the base of his dick as he presses it against my lips and then moves his hand to the back of my head, forcing it down onto him. The thick tip touches the back of my throat and I gag, a surge of need driving through the center of my body like a spike.

He arches his hips upward, and I worked to take him. There's no way for me to set the tempo. No way for me to slow things down or make them more gentle. I don't want to. "That's it," he says. "Take it."

I have to take it. I don't have another choice. He's so big, I feel like my jaw is about to become unhinged, or maybe that's just me. Maybe I'm losing my grip on everything. But I take him as best I can. Completely helpless to do anything else.

There's a rhythm to this too. And I feel like I'm finding it. Feel like I'm losing myself and finding myself all at once. Feel like I'm being battered and also cared for.

This is the medicine I need. He tastes incredible, salty skin and like every fantasy I've ever had.

I'm his display. His art piece. A tool for him to take his pleasure from. I'm not important.

I'm not important.

Somehow, that finds its way to the center of my chest and roots itself there. I'm not important.

I don't need to do anything. I don't need to do anything but let him use me in the exact way he wants to.

It's not heavy. It's not something I have to work for. He's done all the work. He's made me into the thing he needs me to be. It's nothing like the rest of my life. The rest of my life where I have to carry it all. Where I have to show up every day and give my best because if I don't everything will fall apart. No. Caleb – my Wolf – made this the exact scene he wanted it to be. And he made me perfect for it. All I had to do was sit there and be his clay. Moldable to become the exact thing that he needed. I shiver with that realization. With anticipation for what comes next.

He thrusts into my throat one last time before withdrawing. I whimper. Because I want more. I want everything. I was ready to swallow his come and take his pleasure as the ultimate gift. But he has other ideas.

Still holding the back of my head, he pushes me down into the mattress until my cheek rests there against the soft bedspread. "I need that pussy. I need to see if it's as tight as it looks."

I whimper against the bedspread. I can't help it. I want to beg him, but somehow, I know that isn't what he wants from me. He wants me to just take it. He wants me to take it because he tied me up and made me into the gift that he wanted. I can't do anything to stop him. And I can't do anything to change the pace. To make it better. I

just have to lie there. My teeth start chattering, my whole body trembling as he positions himself behind me and grips my hips. I hear him tear open a condom packet and I'm irritated at myself that I'm disappointed about that. When you sign up for the app you have to get yourself on birth control and you have to get STD tests. I completed all of that. It's so in theory you can play bare if you want to. I've never had sex without a condom before. And I'm chagrined to discover that I want it.

That I want feel him empty himself inside of me.

But that's not happening right now, and I know that if I ask him he'll end things, and I wouldn't be able to stand it.

This is about him. His control. His needs. I just have to trust that I can fulfill them.

I don't even have a moment to breathe between the time he presses the blunt head of his cock against my entrance, and when he thrusts in all the way. I gasp, crying out against the blankets as the feeling of him filling me nearly sends me over the edge.

He so big that I'm aware of every slight shift, every breath that he takes. I can feel him pulsing inside of me. And when he begins to fuck me—hard and without quarter, without caressing me or kissing me, without teasing me—I find myself racing toward a screaming orgasm that I would never have imagined was possible.

Normally, I need a lot of foreplay. Normally, I need at least twenty minutes with a vibrator and something hot to watch or read to get myself this wet, to get myself this close.

All I need now is his cock.

And I'm taking it. Taking everything that he's giving me. He grips the ropes, drawing my head back and tugging my braid, the pain mingling with the pleasure as he fucks

into me mercilessly.

Then he leans forward and bites my shoulder— this time more than a warning. More than a test. Branding me as his. I shiver, that shiver vibrating through the core of my body, echoing outward, blooming inside of me, spiraling into the beginning of an orgasm that builds like a crescendo. Each newwave is bigger, more intense than the last, and I'm certain that it can't keep going. I'm certain that it can't get more intense, but then it does. My internal muscles clamp down on his cock and I struggle against the ropes, wishing I had something to hang onto. But I don't. My nipples are tight and sensitive against the bedspread, and I'm arching against it, seeking friction wherever I can as I come and come in an endless wave.

He doesn't relent. He pounds into me harder, faster, extracting a scream from deep inside of me as he growls out his own release. And then I'm left drifting. Floating. Disconnected from reality entirely. Suddenly aware of the fact that my legs are absolutely asleep, my shoulders feel like pins and needles, and my whole body is sore from being stuck in one position for so long. I don't even know how long it's been.

He moves away from me and I lay there, tears flowing down my cheeks, even though I didn't realize that I was beginning to cry. I'm shaking uncontrollably, and I can't stop. Which is when I find myself pulled up into a sitting position and held against the hard heat of his body.

"You did good," he whispers in my ear as he loosens one of the knots in the ropes, the slight give apparent to my extremely sensitized body. He holds me against him as he methodically undoes each and every knot holding me fast. My hair goes first, the full movement of my neck restored before anything else. Then he frees my wrists and loosens the binds around my breasts and my rib cage. It's almost as slow as the tying. Almost. He does it with one hand, the other splayed over my midsection. He still doesn't kiss me. Doesn't caress me in any intimate way. But there's something intense about the way he holds me. Something that feels almost sweet.

Which is a strange word to apply to what just happened.

I don't think very many people would call it sweet.

As soon as I'm freed he lays me down on the bed, then moves over to the closet, which he opens up and disappears into. He returns a moment later with a blanket. He moves to me and wraps me in it, tucking it beneath my body tightly, leaving me feeling swaddled and secure even though he's not holding me now.

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“Wait here,” he says.

He leaves me there, lying on the bed in the silence of the room, the pleasant lavender scent surrounding me and the music still playing.

I let out a long, slow breath, and try to take inventory of my body. I’m having a hard time finding a connection to reality.

I’m having a hard time with just about everything.

I’m buzzing. The aftereffects of my orgasm are still pulsing through me, pins and needles now the dominant feeling in my legs and wrists.

I turn my head to the left slightly, and look out the window. It’s much later in the day. I still have no idea how much time has passed. There is no clock in here, and my phone was discarded somewhere... Maybe the hallway?

Yes, it must’ve been.

I hear his footsteps, but I don’t look away from the window. I feel like if I look at him it’ll break the spell. It’ll make me feel shame. Not the good kind that I felt during the scene. The kind that heightened my desire. But real shame. For what I just did. For what I let him do.

Tears start tracking on my face again, more than a release. Something deeper, and I wish that it would stop.

I hear him set something down on the nightstand to the right. “I brought you water, and a cheese plate.”

I can’t help it, I turned to look then. “You brought me snacks?”

“You need protein. And you definitely need to hydrate.”

“How... How long...” My impulse is to ask how long I was gone. Because that’s what it feels like. I feel like I just spent an unknown amount of time both out of my body and more in it than I’ve ever been. I can’t explain the difference between those things. I can’t explain why it’s like that.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says.

Then he puts his hand on my head and strokes me, like I’m a kitten. This is after care, I suppose. Good doms do it. And I see why now. Because I lost my fucking mind on the journey back to earth after that experience.

I’m stuck in a tangle of weeds. The weeds being my own emotions.

There’s too much happening. The realization that I’ve actually done that and what it says about me, my body, my sexuality—and that it’s him. All those things feel heavy. Feel like just a little bit too much.

Too much is everything we are.

“Sit up,” he says.

I think about obeying him. I think I maybe even do. Except that I’m still lying there. “Avery,” he says.

The use of my name snaps me out of it. I'm angry that he's called me that. I want to be Dove. Being Avery feels like too much work. But he's reminded me that's who I am. And he's Caleb. He is the prick next door who has created so much of the drama in my life.

I sigh heavily and work my way into a sitting position, drawing my arms out of the blanket. Of course, doing that makes it fall down to my waist and exposes my breasts.

Feeling embarrassed about that at this point would be protesting too much.

"Thank you," I say. I take the glass of ice water off the tray, and take a sip. It's lemony, which is nice. And that's a very inane thought. But my brain feels like a wasteland. There are no thoughts. No conclusions. Maybe that is a gift in and of itself. Maybe.

"This doesn't have to cross over into our agreement. It's up to you."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"This, the Dom/sub stuff. It doesn't have to have anything to do with who we are outside this room."

That unlocks something inside of me.

Relief. Fear. I'm not really sure which.

It feels easy, though. Much easier than trying to sort everything out. Much easier than trying to figure out where this discovery of me being a submissive, for absolute certain, fits into my life and where this shift in my relationship with him fits.

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“So what? I clean your house by day and I’m your sex slave by night?”

“I don’t mind fucking during the day,” he says.

“Obviously,” I say, laughing somehow in spite of myself.

“Or, I’m happy to pretend it never happened.”

He’s happy to pretend it never happened? I don’t like the way he says that. It scrapes against something raw and vulnerable inside of me. But of course for him this isn’t a landmark occurrence. It’s not like a whole rockslide happened inside of him. He’s an expert at this. I’m just one of many women he’s tied up and done this to. He’s got it down like a science. It’s obvious.

And that’s good. I benefited from that.

But it’s a good reminder that I’m grappling with something he simply isn’t.

“Okay,” he says. “You don’t like that.”

“Stop it,” I say.

“What?”

“Don’t read my mind.”

“Trust me,” he says. “You don’t want a Dom that can’t read your mind. To an extent,

that's what you need from me."

"But I don't like it. I don't even know what I feel."

"Okay," he says. "How about this. As long as you're working for me, as long as you're paying off your dad's debt, you'll be my sub. You being my sub is not part of you paying the debt off. Those are separate things. You can quit being my sub at any time, and it doesn't affect that agreement. Do you understand?"

I nod slowly.

"But it doesn't have to be completely separate," he continues. "You can ask me questions. This is new for you."

I can't decide whether I'm being patronized or not.

"Remember what I said about trust?"

I scrunched up my face. "Remember what I said about mind-reading?"

He smiles. Just slightly. I try to remember if I've seen Caleb smile before.

"You can stay up here until you're ready to go home," he says. "You can come back tomorrow to clean."

"Are we going to do another scene?"

I'm not sure if I can handle one. I'm also sure that I want to do it again. And I'm afraid that if we don't do it right away, I won't be able to have him again. That he might think better of it.

“Message me in the app,” he says.

I nod.

And without any further conversation he leaves me, naked on the bed and still contemplating everything.

I have a terrible feeling that I’ve gotten a whole lot more change than I bargained for.

Chapter Six

Caleb

The gratitude I feel when she finally leaves is untold.

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I'm experienced at this. I know what I'm doing. But...

I look at my pictures of her, the ones that I took while she was tied up in those red ropes.

She's perfect. Beautiful in ways that no one and nothing ever has been.

I wanted her for so long that this experience is still echoing inside of me. Both as a profound, tremendously incredible experience, and as a big fucking mistake.

I can't give her anything.

I can do this, though. I can try to get her stable with the ranch and I can teach her what she wants. She's definitely a sub. A perfect one.

She needs training. But she's...

Incredible.

I go to my office and I decide to get some work done. I am lost in that, and it's enough to make me forget that I'm waiting for a message when my phone chimes.

You told me to message you.

Then, my work fades away completely, and all I can think about is her.

That experience earlier was...

Fucking transcendent.

I decide than that I'm going to send her the pictures of herself. So that she can see what I see.

The knots binding her together were intricate and the crossover of the rope turned out perfect. The bright red lovely against her pale skin. I'm getting hard again looking at them. I can't say that happens all that often. This is something I've done so many times it's muscle memory. But the experience with her wasn't like that. I was paying attention constantly. Every movement she made. Every small breath she took in and out.

Her response takes a while.

I didn't realize that you were doing something that intricate.

It's what I like. I like to take my time over it. I like the art of it.

I think about elaborating. And then before I can think it all the way through, I do it.

It's the only time my brain is still. A naked woman holds my attention, and add the knots, it's like a state of total flow, concentration and control. There's nothing else like it.

I can understand that. It's the only time that I can remember, in a long time, I didn't feel like I was forgetting to do something. Or like everyone was depending on me.

I lock my teeth together. I don't want to keep going down this path. That's not the point of this app.

You want to do another scene tomorrow?

Yes.

Are you sure?

I was hard on her today. Though, I'm capable of being a lot harder.

Yes. I want... I want to keep doing this.

Anything you would change?

I want you to touch me.

I touched you plenty.

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You were inside of me. You didn't touch me.

And I like that. Honestly. Intimacy without softness. It's what gets me off. But I can see it. I'm putting it together in my mind even as I turn over her request. Her completely immobilized for me, open to me. Making use of the hardware on the bed to hold her fast.

Yeah. I can make that work.

I have an idea.

Okay. I'll come and clean for you tomorrow, and then maybe we can have dinner.

I don't need you to plan it. In fact, I think it would be better if we don't plan things.

There was an element of surprise and a bit of a struggle to the scene from earlier today, and the idea of leaning into that gets me off.

Remember your safe word. I'm telling you, if I push you too hard, you need to let me know.

I will.

I don't trust her, though. And I can't quite say why.

I have trouble sleeping that night because I'm hard as fuck, thinking about how much I wish she was in bed next to me so that I could turn over and take her fast, savage.

That's not in my general repertoire. I don't spend the night with submissives. And everything for me is a ritual.

It makes me feel grounded. Gives me the distance that I want while giving me the physical closeness that I need.

It's a whole fucking trauma response, I'm aware. I've had a lot of therapy. I know exactly why I do the things that I do. But I still do them. I've had my diagnoses – general trauma from childhood neglect and ADHD and it doesn't change anything. Hell, I don't think that I would want to change anything even if I could. All of the bullshit that I've been through brought me to where I am now. So it can't be all bad.

Or maybe it can be. But it doesn't much matter.

When I wake up in the morning, the countdown to when I see Avery is on. I spent way too much of the night before plotting out what I'm going to do to her today.

From what she's said to me, there's an element of the helplessness she experienced in the scene that she likes. The ability to be passive is a good thing for her. I get it.

That's a gift that I give my submissives. It's a chance to be held but helpless. A chance to be free of responsibility. Of the weight of everything. All of it is on my shoulders. And I like that, because I don't have any connections in my life. So for a few hours, this submissive belongs to me. She's mine. I can make her feel things that nobody else can. I can take her to places that she's never even fantasized about. I can do it without her having to do any of the work.

That's my gift.

And hell, it's not difficult for me to understand why Avery needs that.

Her dad is a piece of shit, honestly, and the only reason that I'm cordial with him is because it allows me to engage with helping her out when she needs it.

But that's all I can offer her. It's fucking it.

I busy myself with work on the ranch, making sure that I'm out when she arrives.

By the time I let myself go back to the house, I'm starving. Though, I can't quite tell if it's for food or for her.

I guess it doesn't really matter. There's a craving deep inside of me and it can only be satisfied by going back to the house.

I open up the door, and stop. Because there she is, kneeling naked on my living room floor, folding clothes and looking innocent as fuck. Like she's not playing games with me. Like she's not bare ass naked for the sole purpose of tempting me.

The wolf thing...

I was being fucking petty when I told her to call me that. I've had subs call me master, sir, and I could've easily accepted it from her. But she doesn't make me feel like either of those things. She doesn't make me feel like I'm in control, and I didn't want to give her the validation of being right because she did some research on the internet. So I chose wolf. But right now, that's exactly what I feel like. Starving. Ravenous. Ready to consume her. Ready to punish her for fucking with me.

I think that's exactly what she wants. I hope that's exactly what she wants.

I growl, low in the back of my throat, and I watch as her shoulders go straight, her spine tall as she kneels there. Her hair is in a braid again today, and that gets me hot. I loved the way everything went yesterday. The way I was able to tie her hair into the

elaborate knots, keeping her hair pulled back just the way that I wanted it.

She's a good girl, giving me that again, though we're not repeating the exact same thing today.

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I like repetition. But only to a point. I also need variety. And today I have a whole different art project in mind.

What I really want to do is pick her up, throw her down onto the couch, free myself, and fuck her without any preamble. I feel hot, like I'm losing my mind, and I know that denial is what's best for us both.

I don't need to give myself any kind of instant gratification.

The denial is... Oh, it's almost sweeter than having her.

I deny myself so rarely. It's part of that tricky lack of impulse control thing. But then, there's a dichotomy to that and the way that I like to do BDSM. It's not really different than what I do to my subs, honestly. Pleasure, pain. Denial, satisfaction. In many ways, that's what I'm giving to myself.

I'm giving it to myself now, in spades.

I let myself pounce on her. No warning. I take her down to the floor, pinning her there, fully clothed over the top of her soft, naked body. She wanted me to touch her. She can have it.

She whimpers, looking up at me wide-eyed, wiggling beneath me. I touch her face, let my hand drift down to cup her breast. I denied myself that yesterday. It feels heavy, perfect in my hand, her nipple tight and sensitive. I noticed how sensitive she was yesterday when I watched her rubbing herself against the bedspread while she was coming.

I pinch her hard. And she tries to wiggle away from me. But I don't let her. I pick her up off the floor, holding her fast against my body. "Did you think there wouldn't be consequences for this?" I asked.

"I... I didn't mean..."

"You're fucking with me. You're trying to get a reaction out of me. Congratulations. You have it."

The truth is, I'm thrilled with her. But the Dominant in me knows that what she wants is to be punished. What she wants is anger. What she wants is to feel like she's being carried away, taken outside of herself.

I can give her that.

I can give us both that.

Maybe there's something to the fact that I spend half my time role-playing supreme control when I don't have a whole lot of it, in truth.

I carry her straight up the stairs, heading toward the bedroom, and I force the door open, laying her down at the center of the bed.

"Don't you fucking move," I say.

"I..."

"Shush," I say. "I didn't ask for you to talk. If you want to play games with me, then you're going to get games."

That's exactly how I want her. On her back, looking up at me.

The first thing I have to do is tie her wrists and ankles. That will give me time to work on the rest.

There's a wild look about her, and I relish it.

I go to the cabinet and open up a drawer. Taking out my ropes. I loop one through the hardware that's bolted to the bed, make a loop, and tie it securely before wrapping the rope around her wrist.

"What are you...?"

"I'm not going to give you a guidebook every time we do this," I say. "You have to wait and see."

She's looking up at me with doe eyed fear, and I can't deny I like it. The predator in me likes it. And he's always been there. Angry, tired of feeling powerless. Tired of feeling out of control. It was the greatest discovery of my life that there were women out there who wanted the predator. It gave me a place to put it. Gave me a place to turn it into a good thing. Here and now, it's a really good thing.

I do the same knot on her wrist. And then move to her ankles. Her legs are spread wide, tethered to the footboards. Just enough give that her knees can bend.

I don't want her stretched like the rack, I need her to be able to move just enough.

I know just what I want. I want her open, vulnerable. Unable to hide herself from me. If she wants to play with me, tease me with her body, then she can show it all off.

"You wanted to be touched. Let's make sure I can touch all of you."

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She's breathing hard, shallow. I see panic in her eyes and I wonder what's scaring her about this that didn't frighten her yesterday.

"Safe word, Dove," I say.

She shakes her head, her expression fierce as I slide a rope beneath her, around her ribcage, and slowly replicate the rope bodice I made for her yesterday. But this time I go tight over her tits, one strip of rope above her nipple, one below, those tight buds squeezed tight between the rope.

I loop the end down through a segment around her ribcage, down around the crease of her thigh and just over her labia, where I pull it tight so it holds her pussy open for me. She gasps, lifting her hips up, and I take the end of the rope and crack it against her clit. "Hold still."

A broken, sharp sound rises in her throat. Pleasure. Pain.

She doesn't say the safe word.

I repeat the same action on the other side of her body and now she's totally open to me. Her legs tied wide, nothing hidden.

She's wet and pink and perfect and I'm starving for her.

She arches and pulls against the restraints, and I can't think of when I last saw anything prettier.

Avery Carmichael.

God.

She found me.

She found me on the app, and part of me is tempted to turn that into something. I've never done that in my life. Never romanticized a God damn thing. I'm not romantic. Farthest thing from it. But she felt like something special from the moment I first met her, and God knows this feels like part of that.

That I get to have her now, spread out in front of me like a feast. I had bigger plans. Plans to spend hours designing a rope harness for her, but I decide to forgo those plans. For now. Just for now. She's bound just the way I want her. And there's a limit to how much self-denial I can endure.

I join her on the bed, lying beside her and tracing her jaw with my fingertip, then putting my finger in her mouth. She bites me. Not hard. Just enough to show me her strength. Her resistance. I like it.

I withdraw my finger from her mouth and move it down her body, pinching the top and bottom rope that brackets her nipples so that it clamps down hard on both of them. She has great tits. I've always thought so. But they're even better served up in front of me like this, her nipples red and ripe.

"Look at you," I say. "I could do whatever I wanted to you."

She bucks against the restraints, and I move my hand between her legs. She's wet there. So wet. I push two fingers inside of her, draw that slickness out, and rub my thumb over her clit. She cries out, moves her hips away from me, and tries to draw them down into the mattress. But I'm relentless. I push a third finger inside of her as I

continue to tease her slick clit with my thumb.

“You’re mine,” I say. “All mine.”

I want to devour her. And she’s spread out before me like a feast, so I might as well. I pull my fingers out of her slick pussy and suck them into my mouth, tasting her arousal.

Then I move down her body, my lips hovering above her skin. Until I close my mouth over that hard little clit, sucking it in deep.

I don’t go down on all my subs. Not because I don’t like it. The taste of a woman is one of my favorite things. But it’s a submissive posture, and a little too close to kissing, which is something else I don’t do often. In fact, I much more likely to eat a woman out than I am to kiss her on the mouth.

But having her here like this, where she can’t get away from me and I can eat my way into her for as long as I like?

That’s perfect.

I clamp my arms over the top of her stomach, clasp my fingers together, and hold her completely against my mouth. Entirely at my mercy as I lick her, thrust my tongue inside of her, and get an easy orgasm ripped from the back of her throat.

I want her mindless. I want her to lose it. I want her panting and shaking and begging. So I keep on licking her, even as she sobs. As she begs me to stop. She comes again, and I push three fingers back inside of her while I continue to lick her as her internal muscles pulse around my fingers. I stroke her slick walls until she cries out a third time, taking us both right to the edge. I’m so hard that it hurts, and I’m ready to take her.

I take a condom out of the drawer, grab hold of it and tear it open, covering myself. Yeah, we can have sex without condoms because of the way things are set up on the app, but that's not something I do. Along with kissing.

I drive myself into her, welcoming the tight clasp of her cunt around me as I take her hard and deep. She's held fast by the bindings, which make it easy for me to set the tempo and the pace without her interfering. Mine. All mine.

It's easy for me to imagine, then, what it would be like to take care of her. Completely. To have her like this always, in my bed. I could pay to make all of her problems go away. She could belong to me.

I shove that thought aside as I surrender myself to the physicality of being with her. No thoughts. Just feeling. That's all I want. I want to bury myself in this little sub until I can't think of anything else.

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Take her. Make her mine.

Mine.

Just for now. Just in this bed.

And then I feel her shuddering beneath me, another orgasm racking her frame as she pulls tight on the bindings, trying to free herself as I continue to fuck her. That's when I can't deny my own pleasure any longer. I draw out my release, the climax so good it nearly takes my breath away.

I want to do more than I did last time. And I don't question the urge. I leave her there, tied to the bed, as I go into the bathroom and cross the palatial space, turning on the deep, oval tub that sits there next to one of the windows. Then I go back into the bedroom and slowly begin to unwind her bindings.

"I..."

She doesn't have words. That doesn't surprise me. It was intense.

"You didn't expect that."

"I made dinner," she says. "I figured that we would sit and eat."

"You knew exactly what you were doing. Brat. You knew that if I came in and saw you naked I'd have you tied to the bed."

“I didn’t,” she says.

I lift her up off of the bed, her naked body pressed against me. I’m still partly dressed. I didn’t bother to take everything off. I set her down next to the tub and strip my shirt, jeans, and underwear off, discarding them on the floor. Then I pick her up and haul us both into the tub.

She hums, a sweet, contented sound that I’ve never heard another person make before. I like it. I brush her hair away from her face, let her rest her head against my shoulder. She’s in subspace. Floating on a cloud. I envy her that for just a moment. But watching her experience it is better anyway. I don’t know how to be happy. Not like that. I don’t fucking know.

I lather up a washcloth and begin moving it over her curves, touching her everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. Then I discard the washcloth altogether, moving my hands over her thighs and finally through her slick folds. I toy with her there, dipping a finger in and out of her before sweeping my hands up her body and caressing her breasts. She whimpers, snuggling against me, and I know that I’m going too far. I need to let her recover. I move my thumb over her soft lips, and I let her nip me just gently.

Then when we’re done in the tub, I take her out and wrap her in a large towel, drying her off and depositing her back on the soft bed.

“What did you make for dinner?” I asked.

She looks up at me, bleary. “Roast.”

“Not the easiest thing to eat in bed,” I say.

She laughs. “I don’t think so.”

I moved to the dresser, open it up, and take out a pair of soft sweatpants and a shirt. Along with a silk robe.

She frowns. “Those are women’s clothes,” she says.

“Yes,” I say. “Sometimes I have women in this room. And sometimes they need soft clothes.”

“After you’re done fucking them?”

She’s exiting subspace and she’s getting back to herself. I told her she could ask questions, though. And I meant it. This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, but why not?

“Yes, Avery. After I’m done fucking their brains out, sometimes they need something soft. You do.”

“Maybe not. Maybe I’ll stay naked.”

“You won’t,” I say.

“Why not?”

“Because I need a break, you brat.”

She seems pleased with that. And doesn’t fight me when I put the clothes on her.

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“Now let’s go downstairs and I’ll make you some dinner.”

“I don’t need you to dish it for me.”

“Too damned bad. You’re going to sit your pretty ass at the dining table and let me serve you.”

“But I’m... I’m the submissive.”

“In bed. And in bed you took care of me. So now I get to take care of you.”

“That’s not how it always works,” she points out.

“Thank you. Did you read that on the internet?”

She frowns. “Yes.”

“That’s not how I do things. Some people do. That’s fine. They like to keep the dynamic going when they aren’t having sex. I don’t.”

I don’t tell her it’s because my interaction with submissives is so minimal outside of sex that it’s never turned into that. I don’t tell her it’s because I’ve never kept a submissive as my own.

I can certainly see the appeal. Playing games like she did today. Doing the housework naked, waiting for me to come take her. I can see where we could get to a point where we change things up sometimes. Where sometimes I take her and tie her up, but

sometimes I fuck her right there on the floor. With no discussion. But that would be a different kind of relationship. The kind I simply don't have.

I tie her robe for her and she looks up at me, expectant and lovely.

I want to kiss her. I don't do that.

"You did well," I say. A shiver of satisfaction goes through her body, and it's like I can feel it in my own. "Let's go downstairs."

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I always make sure my submissives are comfortable after sex and sometimes they stay the night, though they do it in this bedroom without me. It's why it's outfitted with soft, comfortable things. Why there's a nice bathroom adjoining it. If Avery thinks I have all these things so I can have dinner and a cozy movie with those women, she's wrong. And I could tell her that, but I decide not to.

We go downstairs, and she sits at the table. I push her chair in while I go to the crockpot where there's roast with vegetables simmering away.

I get out a bowl, and dish her a generous portion. Then I see to myself before getting her a water and myself a beer.

She stares at the water. "I can have a beer," she says.

"You need to drink water first," I say.

"He says to me after making it clear he doesn't do Dom shit out of the bedroom."

I shrugged. "I am who I am."

She looks down at the bowl of food, then back up at me. I take my seat across from her.

“When did you discover that you were... This?”

“You first. What made you discover it?”

Her face turns scarlet and she looks down.

“What is it?”

“I don’t like the answer to the question.”

“Then I really want it.”

She takes a sharp breath. “When I was eighteen. And I went to set your barn on fire. And you... Stopped me. It was very physical and...”

I stare at her, my cock going hard in my jeans, in spite of what we just did. “That did it?”

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“Yes,” she whispered. “I mean, not entirely. I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t know why started fantasizing about being held down and... Restrained.”

“Avery Carmichael,” I say, fighting the urge to smile and then giving up on fighting it altogether. “Do you have a crush on me?”

“No. I fucking hate you. That’s what makes it so confusing. That’s what makes it so... It’s so confusing. I’m supposed to hate you. But you did something to me.”

I know exactly what she’s talking about. I fucking felt it. I knew that I wanted her then. But she was way too young. She’s still too young. And it’s one thing for me to take the lead in teaching her about responsible BDSM – hell, I can consider that a service. I can consider that keeping her safe. But it’s quite another entertaining the idea of keeping her, even remotely.

“But you had no idea that I was a Dom?”

“None,” she says. “I thought it was just my own twisted, weird fantasies, and then I started... Digging around. Trying to find out if anybody else felt the same way I do. I mean, Fifty Shades is a thing. It’s not like BDSM isn’t in the mainstream. But I was still... It took a while for me to figure out that’s what it was. And when I did, I was in a relationship with somebody that I could never share that with.”

“Why not?”

“We had a different dynamic.”

Yeah. I had a pretty good sense for what that dynamic was. She likes to be in control in her everyday life.

“He made you top,” I say.

She sputters a laugh. “Nothing that kinky. Though, in many ways, yes. I was in charge of frequency, and initiating, and all of that. It’s like he couldn’t quite figure himself out. It was my job to do it.”

“I can’t think of anything less interesting to a woman like you.”

“He was just another project. That’s what it comes down to. He just ended up being another project, and I couldn’t make myself enjoy that. I told myself it wasn’t a good reason to break up with somebody. Sex. But then I discovered the Club app. And I found your profile.”

“You broke up with him around the time we made contact, didn’t you? I seem to remember your dad mentioning that.”

“Yeah,” she says. “I did. Two weeks after I first made contact with you. I didn’t know was you. I swear. I had no idea.”

“Oh, I believe you. Because if you had known, you certainly wouldn’t have looked the way that you did when you heard the app chime.”

“No. I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

She told me everything. And I suppose I’ll tell her my story. Even though it’s not one I ever share. But this is different. No matter how much I might like to pretend it’s not, it is.

“You know I was in foster care, right?”

“I heard something about that,” she says.

“Yep. Bounced around constantly, no permanent home. Partly my own fault. I was an unpleasant shithead. And I basically pushed everyone away who tried. Before I was taken away from my mom, I was living in total squalor. My mom was a hoarder. She had everything she ever bought stacked up in our one-bedroom apartment. It was horrible. There was no control there. Nothing.”

I’m so aware that I’m sitting in my minimalist house that is kept ruthlessly clean, and that it says a lot about my psyche. Maybe a whole lot more than I want anyone to see.

“I got removed from her care, which...” I sit there, the silence around us like an oppressive bubble. “It was just a different kind of not having control. In some ways, I would’ve traded everything to go back to her. To go back to all that mess. Because at least... She was there.”

And as an adult I have so much compassion for my mother. Compassion that I can never give to her, because she took her own life shortly after losing custody of me. All I see is on dealt with trauma, which for her was expressed through holding on all those things. The state failed us. And I never had a say in any of it.

“So after that, I just made everyone’s life hell because it was the control that I had. But I have a lot of issues forming attachments to people. For obvious reasons.”

“How did you... How did you get rich, though?”

“The internet,” I say. “Fucking seriously. I ran a campaign doing trading up, have you ever heard of that? Where you startsmall and trade for progressively bigger things. My campaign for that went mildly viral on a platform that’s defunct now. Ended up

making a lot of money and revenue on that, plus got my first building. Made a big show out of turning it into a hotel. And it was famous. So I was successful. I kept building up from there. And made a shitload of money, because it turns out I'm good at this."

"And..."

"The being a Dom? I don't think I'm a Dom because of all my control issues. But you can't prove it. I don't find anything hotter than having all the power. I might've felt that way anyway. Who's to say?"

But maybe not. Doesn't matter. I like what I like. My life is the way that it is. And there's a perfect fit for what I like. What does it matter?

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“I’m really sorry about your mom,” she says. “Mine just left. I’m really difficult. Apparently. She was never happy after I was born.”

“Oh, that doesn’t have anything to do with you,” I say.

“How do you know?”

“Because it doesn’t. Because parents are just a collection of their own issues. Which is something I wish I would’ve understood a lot younger. I used to be fucking furious with my mom. For not being able to get the house clean. For not being able to hold on to me. For quitting on me when I needed her. Because I thought of her suicide as another way she abandoned me. But that was childish stuff. She was just a person. Just like me. And I sure as fuck don’t have everything worked out. Not only that, she was a woman with... I think a lot of mental health issues. No one around to give her support. No one to give a fuck. She did the best she could.”

“Well, maybe the best my mom could do was leaving. But the end result is the same. My dad’s a mess because he can’t cope without her, and I’m left to pick up all the pieces.”

“Your dad could pick up some of his own fucking pieces, Avery. It shouldn’t be you. It’s not your mom’s job to raise him. Though, it was her job to raise you. And you’re right about that. She should’ve stuck with you. But... There are things people can’t do. We’re all just trying.”

“Well it’s heavy,” she says. “Everything feels so heavy.”

“That’s why we fit,” I say. “Because when you’re with me you don’t have any responsibilities.”

She looks down. “Don’t be offended by this. But I have a hard time with that. With what it says about me that I need a man to... Take my power away from me.”

“That’s not what you want. You don’t want your power taken away from you. You just want to not carry everything for a little bit. And there’s nothing weird about that. There’s nothing fucked up about it. You’re tired. And in your position who wouldn’t be?”

“I don’t know. I love my dad. He needs me and...”

“And you need him. But he’s not stepping up in the way that he should. And hell, I don’t even know who my dad is, so I guess your dad is a lot better than that.”

“You have more sympathy for my mom.”

“I think I have more sympathy for others in general. Just based on my own experience.”

She seems to consider that. “That makes sense. I guess.” We finished eating in relative silence. “I... No one ever talks about your mom.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, people do talk about you. I did know that you were in foster care. I did know that you had done some internet thing. I... I didn’t know that you were Dom. And I didn’t know about how you lost your mother.”

“It’s one of those things people whisper about. But they don’t talk about it. Because

there's so much stigma around all that stuff. And it's not fair. I've come to a place where I really believe that she did her best. Where I really believe that she thought I would be better off, that everyone would be better off if she wasn't here. And the thing that makes me really sad about that is I wish I had been able to make her see that wasn't true. But we were both just products of a system that didn't function as well as it should. I don't actually blame anyone for that. There were plenty of people who did their best."

"I'm sorry," she says. "That's really awful."

I nod slowly. "It is."

Silence lapses between us. "I was twenty-five when I first tried BDSM."

"Older than me," she says.

"Fuck. Thanks for that."

She laughs. "Sorry. I didn't know that was a sore spot. I thought men liked an age gap."

"I've never given one much thought either way." It was a lie. I've given a hell of a lot of thought to our age gap. I don't like it. It's not right. It's one of the reasons I should've stayed away from her. I've had sex with subs that were younger than me, subs that were older than me. In the context of the app and scenes, it doesn't really matter. A lot of times we are on equal footing. I've had subs that were very experienced in their mid-twenties. And inexperienced subs in their forties. That's typically how I gauge things. But with her it's different. Because I do know her.

Have known her for a while.

And I know all the circumstances of her life, the way that her dad is frittering away their money. It makes me want to offer things that I can't. Makes me want to give more. More than I have.

So yeah, it was true in every case except with her.

“All right,” she says. “Tell me the story.”

“I knew I was interested. Like you I had full access to the internet.”

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“And you’re so scathing of me.”

“I found a club, and I first learned by having a woman dominate me.”

Something flared in her dark eyes. “Oh.”

“It’s a safe way to learn,” I say.

“But you... You’re not into that.”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not. But again, it gave me a safe way to experience it, and to understand what a submissive is going through. I’m a hands-on learner.”

She looks jealous. At least I’m pretty sure that’s what her expression indicates.

“You’re not topping me,” I say.

“I don’t want to,” she says.

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t... I don’t know,” she says. “I guess I’m just... Shocked. It just doesn’t seem like something you would even be capable of doing.”

“I wasn’t good at it,” I say. “But I had the experience and then started training. After that, I had experiences with submissives who knew what they were doing.”

“Do you remember their names?”

“No. Do you think this is like a virginity loss story? Where you feel all these things and then cry after?”

“Is that how losing your virginity was?”

I lean back in my chair. “No.”

“Me either. I was just tired of being a virgin. I was twenty, and it seemed stupid. So I had sex with John and then after that we were in a relationship. I didn’t cry. It wasn’t good enough to cry.”

He laughs. “Scathing.”

“But I’ll remember your name. After this.”

I look at her, something tightening in my chest. “I’ll remember yours too.”

I don’t know how else to tell her that she special. I shouldn’t tell her any other way. She smiles at me and then goes back to eating her dinner. After she leaves, the house feels too quiet. And I find that really fucking irritating.

Chapter Seven

Avery

I’ve been thinking a lot about my conversation with him. In fact, it’s all I’ve thought about for three days. We haven’t had a scene since that night. I feel like he’s giving me space. Space that I don’t want.

But I wonder if it's space he needs.

And I know that I'm not supposed to push him. I could message him in the app, but he didn't tell me to. But it didn't seem like he was finished with me after we had dinner together. After we had such a nice exchange. But maybe...

Maybe he regrets telling me about his mom. Telling me about his past.

I've gone to his house every day, but have only scarcely seen him during that time.

I thought a lot about what he told me. The losses, what he went through. His control issues. The way that he learned how to be the Dominant that he is.

I shiver, remembering our last time together. It pushed me to the edge, and I loved it. He's skilled. He knows how to make me feel vulnerable and cherished all at the same time.

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He's a man who has total control all the time.

The way he does everything is slow, methodical. I would've said that I'd hate that. But it turns out I love it. When it's him. Because he knows how to get me out of my own head. He knows how to make me feel things that I never have otherwise.

Knows how to make me feel beautiful. Special. Right just the way that I am.

I miss him. Three days without touching him and I'm going crazy.

And just a week ago I hated him. Yeah. Those were the days. I didn't know him then. I take a deep breath and pull his laundry out of the dryer, remembering folding it naked the other day.

We've still never kissed.

Everything feels inside out and backward and more intense for it.

I don't think I've ever spent this much time thinking about a man. The truth is, I don't think I've ever thought as much about a man as I have him even before we had sex.

Sobering indeed.

I start walking up the stairs, and I hear water running.

I wonder if he came home while I was doing laundry.

My throat goes dry, and I walk past his bedroom. I haven't ever done much in his bedroom beyond folding clothes and putting them away. The bedroom where he has scenes is a totally separate space. And it feels like a degree removed from intimacy. Deliberately.

It also feels like a breach of that intimacy to go in there when I think he might be showering.

Basket of clothes clutched my chest, I push open the door, and my heart is beating fast. He's definitely in there. In the shower.

He was angry at me for pushing the other day. But it was a good kind of anger. The kind that led to sex. The kind that led to a punishment that I enjoyed.

I stand there, holding the basket, unsure of what to do. I probably should turn around, go back, act like nothing happened.

I should go back downstairs and see to my chores.

But I feel like I'm being led to him. My alpha wolf, knowing exactly how to get my attention.

Maybe that's delusional. But then, I'm probably entirely delusional, given that I am in a fucking-only relationship with my formerly hated neighbor who I let tie me up and turn me into his sex toy.

Yeah. So there's that.

I drop the basket and move toward the bathroom. He could lock the door if he doesn't want anyone coming in.

I touch the handle, turn it, and find that it gives. Then I push the door open before I can think better of it.

I'm dizzy with anticipation. This could end badly, in multiple ways. It could end badly in a way that's sexy and satisfying for us both. Or it could end in him dropping the axe on our relationship because I've stepped outside the boundaries of what's expected of me.

I don't know if I'm allowed to initiate with him.

I take my clothes off, standing there outside the glass door of the shower. He probably already knows I'm in here. But he hasn't said anything.

Then before I can change my mind, I open up the glass door and step inside the shower. It's filled with steam and I can only just barely make out the shape of his body through the fog. I don't go to him. I don't touch him. I'm simply there for his use. There for him to decide what happens next.

I'm ready to come, just from the anticipation of him touching me. Just with the pent-up need that's been building up inside of me for days.

Then he reaches out from the shadow of the steam, grabs me and pulls me toward him, reversing our positions and putting me up against the wall as he cups the back of my head, his mouth crashing down on mine.

I'm stunned by the kiss. It's hot, hard and deep. There's nothing new or testing about it. He's claiming me, his tongue sliding against mine as he moves his hands to cup my face, kissing deeper and deeper as he presses his body against mine, against the shower wall.

My legs give out, my whole body practically melting against him as he claims me

like that. I can feel his huge, heavy cock against my stomach and I roll my hips against him. He reaches around behind me, grabbing my ass and digging his blunt fingertips into my soft flesh. I whimper, arching my back, my nipples begging for his attention.

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The last time he was so rough with them. It was a pleasure/pain that surpassed anything I'd ever experienced before. I crave more of it.

But he doesn't give me the attention that I'm asking for. Instead, he pushes his fingers through my hair and makes a fist, holding it tight as he draws my head back and kisses me deeper, harder. His other hand is still on my ass, pushing toward my pussy. He shoves one finger inside of me, then another, his movements rough as he continues to claim my mouth. Then he withdraws his fingers, parting my thighs and lifting one leg up over his hip as he thrusts inside me, bare like I've been fantasizing about. Bare like I've been afraid to ask for. He fucksme against the tile wall—that's it, shaft hot inside of me as he pushes me closer and closer to orgasm.

I hold onto his shoulders, desperate for whatever he'll give me.

He growls against my mouth. "So fucking hot. You dirty little slut."

His words push me over the edge—I can't even explain why. Even when I'm bad for him, he likes it. Dirty, desperate. He likes it.

It's what I needed to hear, even though I didn't know that it was.

I come hard, my pussy clamping down on his cock, and he thrusts into me three more times—rough and hard—before he spills hot and slick inside of me.

He doesn't withdraw. He stays buried there as he turns the water off and opens up the door, lifting me off the ground and carrying me out into the bathroom. He finally pulls out of my body, wrapping me in a towel and drying me vigorously. He likes to

do things for me when we're done having sex. I guess that's true even when it isn't a big scene.

My head is swimming. Because that wasn't a scene. That was sex. Unplanned, and still with the spirit of the roles that we play sexually, but without the explicit protocol.

Without permission. Without a plan.

I think about what he said to me earlier. How he doesn't keep a submissive the way that some Doms do. Doesn't extend the dynamic out of the bedroom. Suddenly, I wish that he did. I imagine living here, existing to serve him. Please him.

That almost makes me laugh. Because I'm not going to spend my entire life being a sex slave. But God, it's tempting. It would be easier than trying to figure out what the fuck I actually want.

Just thinking that makes me want to cry and I squeeze my eyes tight shut, trying to keep myself in the present, trying not to let myself get tangled up in what's next.

"I'm going to get you something soft to wear," he says.

I nod.

"Go and sit on the bed."

I obey, my leg still feeling like jelly, and I sit on the edge of his bed. His bed. That's a new intimacy. It's not lost on me.

He returns with another set of luxury clothes from his secret drawer.

"So you keep these for all your submissives," I say.

I don't mean for it to sound like an accusation, though it does.

He slips the shirt over my head, and I'm so warmed by the gesture of care it makes my chest ache.

"Yes," he says. "They usually sleep in the other room. Some of them travel from far away, and it would be... Un-gentlemanly of me to send them away in the dead of night." He grins at me, a wolfish smile. He's no gentleman, and we both know it. But he does have that caregiver streak in him that runs deep.

It fascinates me, knowing what I do about his life. He speaks about the control aspect of domination, but it's not the only thing that he likes.

I wonder if it is something that appeals to him because it something that was missing from his life.

Certainly it sounds like no one really took care of him.

I'm soft and comfortable, and he picks me up off the foot of the bed, holds me up against his chest, and carries me down the stairs. I loop my arms around his neck, and I don't ask where he's taking me. I don't really care. Which is how we find ourselves on his couch, eating popcorn and watching a Marvel movie like we're two normal people who just had a date.

It's a sincerely strange new development.

I'm not unhappy about it.

He puts me on his lap, feeding me as we watch the movie. I'm not paying attention, but then, it's all explosions to me. I'm so unbearably aware of his hard heat all around me. The way that his large hand rests on my side. The way he has me cocooned

against him.

That's what I really care about.

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“Thank you,” I say, as the credits roll on the movie. “For not throwing me out of the shower.”

“I was waiting to see what your next move would be.”

I laughed. “Well, I can’t say that I fully knew. It’s just... You were there, and I missed you.”

He chuckles, brushing his knuckles against my cheek. “So what is it you want, Avery?”

I’m stunned by the question. Not entirely sure how to answer it.

“Right now?”

The thing that immediately comes to mind is getting on my knees and sucking his glorious cock again.

“With your life. You feel too big for this place. Honestly. A woman like you, with an appetite like you have, you’re just going to wither and die here.”

“That’s cheery,” I say.

“I know what it’s like. Because I was the same way. Everything here felt like being restricted. Locked away. There was better for me out there.”

“I love the ranch. I love my dad. Someone has to take care of it. And of him.”

“Okay. But there’s a point where a lot of the bullshit that’s going on, that’s on him. How long can you hyperextend yourself to save him? How long can you keep putting yourself out there to make everything better for him while doing the bare minimum for yourself?”

“I don’t... I love the ranch,” I say again.

“So that’s your dream. To save it. But how long is it going to be saved? Just until your dad takes the money again. He needs treatment.”

I start to feel panic building in my chest. “But I don’t know how to get that for him. And he’s not going to listen to me. He’s not going to do anything.”

“I can talk to him. He respects me. I’ve helped a lot over the years...”

“Helped?”

He sighs. “Avery, why the fuck do you think I’ve bought any of the acreage up? Why do you think I lent him the money this time? If it’s not me it’s going to be somebody else. I did it because I didn’t want you to lose everything. And I also knew that you were too fucking stubborn for me to intervene anymore obviously than that.”

“Have you been... Domming me this entire time?”

I’m stunned by the idea, because it seemed like... Like he wasn’t trying to take over. Which is what I thought was happening. But recasting that into him trying to take care of us, to take care of me, is something that I really don’t know what to do with.

“That’s probably the closest thing to the truth,” he says. “I’m not a hero. I’m not the kind of guy that knows how to be in a relationship, or make a family, or do anything other than fuck your brains out. But I know what it’s like to have no one there to take

care of you. And I know what it's like to feel fucking alone. I know what it's like to feel like everything is a mess. That's how things seemed to be going for you, and I wanted it to be better."

"Dammit. I... Why did you let me think that... Why did you..."

"I didn't know you. I just saw you, and I saw the same kind of fear that I saw in myself. When I was a kid, when I didn't know how I was going to survive. Or if I was going to. That's what you look like. It's what you look like all the time. You're running flat out trying to save something that someone else is actively trying to pull apart with their addictions. You can't save him."

"But the ranch is my legacy," I say, my voice small.

"But what if you could go to school? What if you could do something else, live somewhere else? You could go to the city and be near a club. Find more Doms to show you new things. Get a degree, have a career."

I feel like he's offering me something, but pushing me away at the same time, and I don't know what to do with it. On its face, it seems like he's almost being kind. But only almost.

"But I can't do that. I can't leave my dad."

"What if he was taken care of?"

"Are you offering to be my wealthy benefactor?"

"It's what I've been," he says.

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I shake my head. Because I don't want his guilt. I don't want whatever this is. I certainly don't want to be paid for. Something that he manipulates to satisfy his caregiver urges without getting his emotions involved, and I am weirded out that I feel that way, because just a little bit ago I was fantasizing about what it would be like to be his professional sex toy. But the thing is, I know I can't do that. Because if that's our life, then I'm always going to be waiting for him to cut the cord.

If there's nothing substantial keeping us together, if it's just an agreement, just a thing that he's doing, it's not any less transactional than the life I live now. Where I could do the wrong thing and...

No. I can't live like that.

I already live like that. Doing everything I can to keep mine and Dad's head above water. Doing everything I can to fawn on the one parent I have left. So afraid that I'm going to lose him.

"And I can't tell my dad that he has to go to rehab."

"I'll do it," he says. "At least let me do that for you."

I nod slowly. "Okay. I'll let you do that."

That seems reasonable, at least. That seems like something I can deal with.

"Stay the night with me," he says. My throat goes tight. "You can stay in the playroom."

Of course. He doesn't want me to stay in his bedroom. He's keeping those lines drawn. Making sure that I'm reminded that I am a sub. Not his girlfriend. And definitely nothing deeper. That his offer a few moments ago was about sex. About the idea of keeping me on retainer, at the very most, and not about feelings.

Still, I kind of want to stay with him.

"Okay," I say.

"We can go for a ride tomorrow. You can see the ranch. You can see that I actually do know how to ride a horse."

I laughed. "I know that you know how to ride a horse."

"You don't think I'm a real cowboy."

"No, I definitely do," I say.

And something in my chest feels too tight, too painful. But we finish the movie and I go up to bed, my thoughts churning.

What would I do if I didn't feel tethered to this place? The ranch is my dream. It's my life. The truth be told, the ranch is also a millstone. It's drowning me.

But I don't know who I am without it. So honestly, it feels like drowning either way.

Chapter Eight

Caleb

I'm up at the ass crack of dawn with coffee on, and I'm stopping myself from going

and waking her up. It's good to let her sleep.

Last night keeps replaying itself in my mind, over and over again. When she appeared in the shower I couldn't think. All I could do was claim her.

I broke a lot of my own rules.

Kissing her. Fucking her without a condom.

But I wouldn't take it back. It was too good.

Of course, it's also what landed me in this position. Where I let her spend the night for no good reason and made her all kinds of offers, including going on this ride today, which is by far the least concerning of what I was about to put on the table.

But hell, I've got more money than I'll ever be able to spend. Why not fix her life? Why not offer her everything? The sun, the moon, the stars. No one's ever fucking offered her that before, and I know it. Her ex-boyfriend was just a whole bunch of work for her. Her dad is all kinds of labor. Her mom left her behind. I can't give her anything normal. But I could give her a life that looks exactly how she might want to design it. I can dress her up in the most beautiful clothes, buy her a place in the city. Send her to school. I've never wanted to take care of a submissive in that way before. But I want to do it with her. It feels right. Like a natural extension of wrapping her in a blanket after a scene. Of making sure she's hydrated and has enough protein.

I'm obsessed with the idea, if I'm honest. And within that, I want to know more about her. She was funny last night. Not telling me much of anything.

She sticks with her story. With this idea that all she wants is the ranch.

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But I wonder if there's ever been any room in her life to want something else.

She was ashamed of her sexual desires, I know that much. I'm the only person that knows. She hasn't even told her friends.

Had to sign up for an app, because there was no one she could talk to about her fantasies, and her desires.

I went through my whole adolescence daring people to reject me. Because I had already lost the only person I cared about.

But Avery's scared of rejection. She's trying to be whatever people need her to be. Whatever they want her to be.

I frown, that thought weighing heavily on my mind as I hear soft footsteps padding down the stairs. I smile, then get a second mug out of the cabinet, pour a cup of coffee, and by the time she gets in there, it's waiting for her.

"Good morning," she mumbles.

"Good morning, Dove," I say.

A shy smile lights up her face. "Wolf."

She crosses the space to me and stops in front of me. She's waiting for me to make the first move. I reach out and cup her chin. And kiss her. Not deep and hard like I did yesterday, perfunctory, almost, but I feel her melt beneath my lips and I feel

roaring satisfaction in my chest.

“Sweet girl,” I say, dragging my thumb over her lip.

She’s practically glowing at the compliment. I want more of that. I crave it. In spite of everything.

I take her to the barn and she immediately puts herself to work. I put a stop to that shit right away.

“Absolutely not,” I say. “I’m taking care of everything.”

“I know how to tack up a horse.”

“I know. But you’re not doing anything.”

“You’re such a liar. You said that you don’t like a sub outside of the bedroom.”

“Maybe I’m trying something new.”

Dangerous. Fucking dangerous.

She looks pleased by that, though, and I like for her to be pleased.

We get the horses ready and mount up outside the barn. Then I urge my horse forward, and she follows behind me. It’s a nice day. The kind of day that reminds me why I moved back here, for reasons beyond revenge, to show the town that I made something of myself. It’s funny, because initially, I bought the place with some measure of spite. But that fire inside of me has dimmed.

“You know, I always figured that I would be a rancher,” I say. “I figured that I would

have a place like this, though of course I had no idea how much any of it cost. Had no idea that the odds were this would always be beyond me. It seemed like a simple life. My own plot of land, horses. I never imagined getting into real estate. I had no idea what that was.”

“I always assumed I would take over the ranch,” she says.

“Did you?”

She laughs. “I mean, when I was really young I thought about moving away. Living somewhere else. Trying different things. I had some ideas about working in an office building. But I didn’t know what I would do. And then after my mom left, and things got harder and harder for my dad, it became really clear to me that he needed my help.”

“You really don’t know what you wanted to do?”

Her face takes on a strange, bashful quality, and I can’t help but thinking that she does know what she wanted. She’s just embarrassed to say. Like it might change my opinion of her, and she can’t handle that.

“You can tell me,” I say.

“No. It’s stupid. I wanted to join the pro-rodeo circuit. I wanted to barrel race. I loved doing that for fun in the arena. I had fantasies of winning prize money and traveling, going away to school. Maybe studying business so I could get better at running the ranch, or maybe changing the business. I’d rather have horses than cattle.”

Suddenly, I want to make her dreams come true more than I want anything. Hell, I’ll buy the fucking rodeo for her if that’s what she wants.

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“I don’t want to do that anymore, to be clear.” She looks away like she’s embarrassed. “I’m too old to start something like that. A lot of these women who are already elite at barrel racing are in their teens.”

“What if you didn’t need prize money to make it worthwhile? What if you could just do it because you loved it?”

“That’s not a thing in my world. It has to have a point and a purpose to it, it has to earn something or I can’t do it.”

But not our games. She doesn’t say that, but I feel the weight of it then. For a few hours she gets to just be. She doesn’t need to be productive. She doesn’t need to make a difference or earn money or justify her existence.

She’s just mine.

I suddenly feel like I want that to be more. To go deeper. Farther.

I think she does the thing that everybody wants her to do because she doesn’t want to let her dad down. Because she’s scared of what will happen if she doesn’t show up and do exactly what’s expected of her.

I want to know everything about her. I want to break her open and get inside her. It’s the oddest fucking impulse. I want more than we have. I want more than I’ve ever had from anybody.

“What would you be if you could be anything?” she asks me.

“A cowboy. That’s kind of what I’m gearing up to do.”

“Really?”

“I’m stepping down. As the CEO of my company. I’m going to remain a majority shareholder, but I’m not going to be part of the day-to-day running anymore. I don’t want to do it. I don’t care about it. It made me a fuckton of money, but it doesn’t make me happy.”

“What will make you happy?”

Well, didn’t she drill down right into the heart of all my issues.

“I don’t know if anything will. But this is close.” I pause. “If you didn’t have to worry about anything, what would you do?”

She looks up toward the sky. “I guess I would travel a little bit. See some of the rest of this planet. I don’t know, I think back when I had dreams the thing that appealed to me about that was experiencing things I hadn’t before.”

“And the rodeo?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe I would, why not? If we’re just dreaming, let’s throw that on there too.”

But she can’t. She can’t because she feels like she has to keep everything going. She can’t because she feels like she has to earn everybody’s love and affection. Already lost her mom’s.

“You dumping your boyfriend was the best thing you’ve done, you know?”

She looks at me, scrunching her nose up. “Is it?”

“You did it for yourself. You didn’t worry about preserving his feelings. Or keeping him with you.”

She laughs. “I guess that says a lot about what I think about him. Because usually, I can’t do that. You’re right.”

“You’ve never been shy about letting me know what you think either. You know, I think the night that you came to set my barn on fire was maybe the most real you’ve ever been.”

It’s true. She was just following her own feelings. Her own passion. And I think I want more of that.

I want to get her there. Where she’s not just trying to please everyone else. She needs to be pushed. I know that.

And I’m in the perfect position to do it.

“Stay with me again tonight,” I say.

“Oh I don’t... I shouldn’t do that. Eventually I need to go home.”

“Why?”

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“My dad is going to wonder what I’m doing.”

“You are twenty-four years old. Who the fuck cares what you’re doing?”

I can see that doesn’t work for her. That she feels so enmeshed with her father that she can’t do whatever she wants.

“Tell him you’re staying with me.”

“But he’ll think I—”

“Why does it matter?” I shake my head. “He’s a gambling addict. He puts you and your livelihood in danger all the time, and doesn’t give a fuck what you think. And you waste all this time worrying about what he thinks. More people should give a shit about disappointing you, Avery.”

I ride ahead of her on the trail, my heart pounding hard like we were having sex, not a conversation. This girl has me messed up. I’m not sure I want to put it back to the way it was before.

Chapter Nine

Avery

I can’t stop thinking about what he said out on the trail. He went back out to work afterward, and I decided to make dinner for us both.

I feel uncomfortable about the idea of talking to my dad. I'm not going to do it. But what he said about how people should be worried about disappointing me sticks with me.

I turn it over and over in my mind. He doesn't come in for dinner, and I wonder if I should go. He mentioned that I could spend the night but I didn't obey him as far as telling my father what I was doing, and I'm not sure if the offer stands if I don't do exactly as he says.

My heart beats faster, my body feeling numb as I worry about whether or not I've done the right thing. About whether or not I'll please him.

I'm standing at the kitchen counter, and I hear footsteps behind me. For some reason, I don't turn. I just stand there, looking at the counter.

He walks up close, reaches around and grabs my arm, pinning it hard against my back. And just like that, I know. The reason that I didn't turn when he walked in was because it was a scene. I could sense it.

I feel almost triumphant that I've managed to feel it. On instinct.

He grabs my other hand, pinning it firm against my lower back.

Very quickly, he ties my wrists, but these aren't the soft ropes that he normally uses. These are rough, scratching against my skin, much more like a lasso, much more like I had initially imagined bondage with a cowboy to be.

It's a quick, one-handed knot that does its job, effectively disabling me.

My hair is loose, and it hasn't been this whole time we've been together. He brushes it to the side, wraps it around his fist and pulls as he angles my neck, and leans in for

what I think is going to be a kiss. But it turns into a bite. “You need to be reminded,” he says. “Who decides.”

This is my punishment for yesterday. Yesterday, which was wonderful, but punishment doesn't always come because a Dom isn't pleased. It comes because there's pleasure to be had from it, and I know enough about the dynamic between the two of us to know that's what's at play here.

He turns me around to face him and backs me up hard against the counter, the edge of it biting into my back, into my arms.

Then he reaches up, grabs the collar of my shirt, and takes it between both hands to tear it open.

He rips it to shreds, the only way that he can get it off my body now that he's bound my hands. The ferocity, the feral nature of his actions, leaving me immobile and speechless.

He takes a knife off the counter and my heart stops as he presses it beneath the fabric of my bra, the blade cold against my skin as he turns it and slashes my bra free. It meets the same fate as my shirt, going into as many pieces as it takes but with the blunt edge of the knife rather than his hands.

My heart is fluttering like a trapped bird, fear and desire and shock all warring together. He's found a way to make this even more than it ever has been. To shock me.

I like it. I like him like this, I realize.

Maybe you aren't supposed to want your Dom out of control, but it feels like mine is right now, and I am living for it. “Get on your knees,” he says.

I obey him, going down to the hard kitchen floor as he wraps the rough rope around my neck. I gasp, arousal driving itself hard between my thighs as he ties a secure knot that makes it so the rope is loose enough around my neck, so that it isn't in danger of choking me. But it rests there, heavy against my breastbone, the end of the knot pressing the base of my throat. A feeling of ownership, of intensity, making it feel like my heart might burst through my chest.

The floor is brutal against my knees, and I'm frozen there while he makes art with these torturous ropes that he's brought to me. He lashes them down either side of my breast, and then on the other side, framing them and squeezing them tight, the blood flow concentrated now. The rope goes tight at my rib cage, my midsection, around my hips. He makes a harness for me out of those ropes. The placement of each and every cross and knot intentional. Pressing just so.

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He cuts me out of my jeans, ruthless and not caring if they're my favorite, or even asking if he can.

Then I'm naked, and that allows him to continue on with his makeshift harness. He does the same thing he did to me two days ago, fastening the ropes just so between my thighs so that my pussy is fully exposed to him. Open. My hands are bound and I can't cover up. Though I can still squeeze my legs together if I want to. Then he moves behind me, his large hand going between my shoulder blades as he pushes me down, my breasts flat against the hard floor. He grips my ankle, pushes my leg back so that my heel is touching my ass, and begins to lash the back of my calf and the back of my thigh together, so that my knees are stuck bent, separated and open.

My heart begins to beat faster. I feel trapped. Truly trapped. Before when he's tied ropes, enough of me has still been free. But I am bound, from the base of my neck all the way down to my ankles. And he takes his time. The floor is hard and it's nothing like being tied up on the bed, where I can lose track of time and forget that I'm being held in stasis. No. My rib cage aches, the knots on the front of my body digging into my skin, the exercise of discomfort and endurance much more pronounced than the fun of surrender it has been all the other times we have been together. It's like he's taken the dial and turned it up.

And I'm suspended between my fascination, my desire to give him everything he wants, and my fear.

When he's finished tying my legs in that kneeling position, he takes another rope suspended between my ankles and ties a knot there, binding my legs to the rope that goes down my back. My hands and feet are both caught there and I am completely

and totally unable to move. He picks me up, an improbable bundle, and every time I struggle all I do is create pain. If I pull too hard, the ropes tighten around my breasts. If I flex my feet they press down hard on my pussy.

If I arch my back the rope by throat goes tighter. Like his hand is there. Like he is everywhere.

He holds me against him as he carries me up the stairs, taking me into the bedroom. He pushes me down on the bed, his hand hard on the back of my head. “You need to be punished for what you did,” he says.

He puts his hand between my legs, and pushes two fingers inside of me. I’m wet. In spite of how frightened I am. Wet in spite of my fears.

I don’t know still if I want this, or if it’s too far. I don’t want it to be too far. If he wants this, if he needs this, then I want him to have it.

But this is pushing me out of my own fantasy. Out of that feeling that I can be good and used just as I am. It’s making me afraid. For what happens next. Because he could take this wherever he wants it to go, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

That’s a balancing act for me. Because part of me likes it. Part of me likes knowing that he could do whatever he wants. That he could do something I don’t like and I’m powerless to stop him. It even turns me on. I don’t know what that says about me.

I don’t even know why.

Why this hot rush floods me at the idea of being at his mercy. It’s not even an idea. It’s reality. I am absolutely and completely at his mercy.

Two fingers become three, and I am filled deliciously. And then it’s four, and I have

to bite back a cry of pain.

Then he withdraws from me, his open palm coming down hard on my ass. The rope bites into my skin. He doesn't have a lot of space where there isn't rope crossing his way, but he finds it unerringly and brings his hand down for another swat. And another. We haven't done this. Explicit pain hasn't been part of our game together.

But I'm lost in it, in this maelstrom of sensation. Good and bad, pleasure and pain, fear and anticipation all merge into one delicious song that echoes through my body. I feel him everywhere, in every bite of the rope, each and every sting of his palm against mine.

My arms are asleep, my legs numb. And my ass feels like it's on fire. I'm teetering on the brink of an orgasm and I almost don't want it to come. That's when it hits me.

It's not gentle. I'm not sure anymore if it's even pleasure, or if the hard contact of his hand on my bare ass is the pleasure, or maybe it's all pleasure. Maybe it's all pain.

I scream as my climax tears through me, and then he pushes three fingers inside me as and pushes me back up to the peak again.

He moves in front of me, and I can see him only for a moment before he puts a blindfold over my eyes. I'm suddenly afraid. Everything is black and I can't see him. He's not touching me.

"You don't seem to have learned your lesson," he says.

I hear him move behind me, and then the next strike is harder than any of the ones before. Not his hand. A riding crop. He brings it down hard on my already tortured skin. I cry out, and tears start to run down my cheeks as I come again, gasping, sobbing.

“God dammit, Avery,” he growls.

And he does it again. And again.

I might die.

I might want to.

It’s too much but I don’t want to quit. I want him to get what he needs from this. I want him to have everything he needs.

I can do this.

I can endure it.

I grit my teeth and I ride the wave, the darkness pressing in on me. And then he stops.

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It's quiet.

I can't move, and he's not there. I can't hear him. I can't sense him. I imagine myself like that in the room, bound up and unable to move and abandoned.

Panic flutters in my breast, worse than any of the pain that's come before this.

“Wolf?”

There's no answer.

I can't explain the wrenching pain that rocks me. I can't explain the panic. But it's like everything I've ever been afraid of crushing me all at once. I've shown him everything and he's abandoned me. I'm alone. In spite of how hard I tried.

I'm not enough.

I'm sobbing and it's like I'm falling. Weeping like a child and I can't stop.

You can stop it.

“Halt,” I say, the word a broken whimper.

Then he's there. Like he always was. I was never alone, I just didn't trust him. I'm covered in shame.

I failed him. I'm in so much pain, and still the pleasure is rolling through me like a

thundercloud.

And I don't deserve it. I don't deserve it. I used the safe word.

I failed him. I didn't give him what he wanted.

I'm not a good enough sub. I'm not good enough. He wants things that I can't do for him. I hit my limit before he did. I'm sobbing uncontrollably.

And then the knife is back. He doesn't untie the ropes. He cuts them free, unbinding me in seconds, before pulling me onto his lap and holding me as I shake and weep, expending my misery all over him.

"I didn't do it," I say.

"Avery," he says. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do. And you waited too fucking long to do it."

"What... What you mean?"

"You fucking know what I mean, you fucking stupid girl. It matters what you want. You don't have to just sit there and endure things for someone else."

"I'm your submissive," I say. "That's the point."

"It is not the fucking point. It's supposed to be for both of us. And that safe word is for you as much as it is for me. So that I don't hurt you. So that I don't scare you. So that I don't put you in a position where I've gone too far. And I was afraid that you weren't going to use it. That you wouldn't ever tell me what the fuck you actually want because after talking to you, I realize that's what you do."

I'm naked. I'm naked and crying, and throbbing in his arms, but his words just now make me feel far more frightened and exposed than I did before.

They make me feel small and silly and seen.

Because he's right. There was a lot about that I enjoyed. I liked how feral he was. I liked how rough he was. But I let him take me past the point of pain that I could endure. I can't take that much pain and then be denied touch, then be abandoned. But I took it because I thought I had to. He always made it clear that I didn't need to do that for him, but I did it to myself.

He tested me. And I failed it, just not in the way that I initially thought.

"I wanted you to use your safe word," he says. "Because what you need to understand is that what you want matters."

"But I like being used for your pleasure. I like existing to please you."

"I like it too. But that can't be all it is.

"But it feels good. It feels good to know that I'm enough on my own."

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“You are still. You’re still enough on your own even when you’re holding your own boundaries. Because I’m not enjoying myself if you’re not enjoying yourself. And yeah. That’s a little bit fuzzy. Because sometimes you enjoy pain, and I enjoy giving it to you. But it has to stay on that edge.”

“Oh.”

“Because you are enough in your enjoyment of what we do,” he says. “I cannot stress that enough.”

It’s so weird how issues pop up over and over again. Because I chose him to be my Dom, I sought out this dynamic so that I could satisfy something in myself, but the minute that it started it got wrapped up in me wanting to please him, because that is part of the sexual dynamic. Because it is part of being a submissive. He’s right. The minute the balance is off, and it’s more pain and fear than it is the kind of pleasure that I like, I’m letting us both down if I don’t put a limit on it.

It’s my whole fucking life.

“It wasn’t the pain really,” I say.

“Wasn’t it?”

“Well, the pain was a lot, but it was feeling like you were gone. If I’d known you were there I could have taken more.”

“But did you want more?”

“I don’t know. I have a feeling I’ll get used to more.” There is a sick sort of triumph I feel, and a little bit of delight at the thought of how this will mark my body.

“I’m never going to leave you like that, okay? You can trust me.”

“Even if I disappoint you?”

He grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger, his gaze intense. “Sweet Dove, you can’t disappoint me.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, tears leaking out of the corners of them.

I’m exhausted.

My whole body is totally wrung out. And he knows that.

He wraps me up in a soft blanket and brings me something to eat and something to drink. Lets me lay there on the bed for a long time, lost and not in subspace, but in the dark trenches of my own mind.

My refusal to set a limit didn’t put me at risk – he would never physically harm me, and I know he’s well aware of limits that need to be there for actual, physical safety.

But it is such an echo of the way that I live my life that it has me feeling oppressed. Because that’s what I do. I take one more, one more, one more strike, and just keep going. I grin and bear all of my dad’s shortcomings. I’ve tried to make up for the lack of my mother being around. I’ve tried to be the ranch hand that he can’t afford, and the financial advisor that he won’t listen to, and I don’t even know what my own dreams are.

I still feel like I’m failing. It’s why I thought I was drawn to this lifestyle. Because it

feels good to have someone tell me what to do for once. Because it feels good to have somebody take charge.

Because it feels good to know that he can tie me up and tie me down, that without effort, I can be what he needs. But that's twisted up.

Because I've needed something more from him all this time. Or maybe I need it from myself.

Honesty about what I want. About the fact that what I want is specific and high maintenance. That I want this man to spend hours giving me pleasure. Making me into his version of art.

That I want his attention, his touch, his cock. That I feel like I deserve it.

Because he might be my alpha wolf, but I am the dove. Special, angelic and cherished, even.

That as much as I love being bound by his ropes, I love being wrapped in a blanket afterward just as much.

That I love the moments when he's fawning over me. Giving to me.

And I'm getting something from it.

But I want to not think or try, and he gives me that. That he does all this work to have access to my body.

And God, that's power in a way that I haven't fully given it credit.

Chapter Ten

Avery

I drift off for an hour or so in the extremely soft bed and then I wake up, fully accepting that I'm going to have to go home for a little bit. Not just because I need to see my dad, but because I need some space. Because I need a chance to get my head on straight.

I have to take more of his soft clothes, because he destroyed the ones I was wearing yesterday.

It's dark outside when I go downstairs. He's sitting there in the living room, staring out the window.

"I'm going to go home," I say.

"Are you all right?"

I nod. But I'm not sure that I feel all right. "I just need a minute."

"Of course."

He doesn't kiss me or anything like that. Because that would be like a real relationship, and not this Dominant/submissive training.

I hope he doesn't think I'm upset. About what he did. I recognize that what he did

was part of the lesson I needed to learn. If I'm ever going to have another Dom, especially if it's one that isn't as experienced as him, I need to be confident in setting my own limits. In my own power. That's the piece that I've been missing. The power that the submissive has. It's a violation of trust to not use the safe word when it needs to be used, and I fully understand that now.

In fact I feel that I probably owe him an apology. For putting him in a position where he did hurt me, this man who is so controlled, who I know that I can trust to press a knife against my breastbone and not draw any blood.

He is the definition of power under extreme control. It is remarkable.

Maybe part of the reason I'm so fascinated by it is that no one with any authority in my life has ever behaved with control.

What a funny thought. I've never considered that before.

My dad has no control over his vices and my mom has no control over herself.

I've had to compensate by having all this control, and surrendering it to him, I know why I like that. But I think I also marvel at his strength, at the way he measures that, because I have never seen someone choose to harness themselves the way that he does.

It's incredible, truly. And so is he.

When I pull up to the ranch house, my chest gets tight. I feel the old, familiar stress rising up inside of me. Because this place just sucks all the life out of me.

When I walked through the front door, my dad is sitting there in the living room. "Where have you been?"

“Caleb Flynn’s.”

My dad looks like he doesn’t know what to say.

“Since yesterday?”

“Yes,” I say. I make sure not to invite questions. My statement is definitive.

“Well... There’s chores to be done here.”

“I know,” I say. “And I’ll be here for most of the day tomorrow, and I’ll make sure that they get done. But then we’re going to have to make some changes with how we structure things around here. Because I can’t work this place all the time.” I nearly cry as those words come out of my mouth. I didn’t know that I was going to say them. But I need to use my safe word here. As cheesy and stupid as that sounds. I have been letting myself get crushed beneath the weight of what my dad expects of me, and I have got to draw a line. Because I love this place. I really do, but it’s not the sum total of my dreams.

“I want get back to barrel racing.”

“Well, that’s not going to do anyone any good,” my dad says.

“It’s not going to make any money, not really. But I love it. So it’s going to do me some good. It’s going to do me some good to be able to do something that I really care about.”

“We’re up to our eyeballs in debt.”

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“You are, Dad. You’re up to your eyeballs in debt. And I do my damndest to try and fix it. You have any idea why I have been at Caleb’s? He gave me the opportunity to work off your debt.”

Something triggers deep in my dad’s gaze.

“He didn’t... He didn’t blackmail you into sleeping with him?”

“What would you care if he did? That’s your line? Whether I’m scrubbing his floors were sleeping with him, what difference does it make? You’ve put us in that position. You put me in that position. Don’t act like you care about me now, just because you feel like that would... What? Disgrace your name? Because you can’t have a wife that left you and a daughter who whored herself out for your debts?”

“I’m worried about you,” he says, his voice rough.

“Since when? Because you haven’t been worried about me as I’ve worked myself to the bone all these years. You haven’t been worried about me then. Now suddenly you’re worried? Let me handle it. I’m paying the debt. And because I’m paying the debt, I’m making changes. I’m going to take some control over the finances. Or I’m not going to help you anymore.”

“But without you the ranch will fail.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be that way. You’re grown ass man. So either you give me some control over this, or I’m done. And if everything falls apart, then it fucking falls apart. But I won’t do it anymore. I need to have my own life.”

Maybe my dad will hate me forever. Maybe I'll be left by the one parent who actually gives a shit. Maybe I've alienated him completely, but I just don't care anymore. Because I have been at my limit for so long, and I've just been letting it happen and happen and happen.

And I never said stop. I never said that it was too much. Because I didn't think that what I wanted got to matter. But now I do. I don't wait for him to answer, I go straight up the stairs, my stomach hollow.

I lay down in bed, and I don't cry. I text Caleb, and I tell him what I did.

Good for you.

And then I lay there, totally unable to sleep. And I do something that seems maybe a little bit silly.

I pick up my phone and I open up the app. Because that's where it seems like we need to have this conversation. That's where it seems like it's the best way for us to talk about it.

I want to do another scene.

Do you?

One that's my fantasy. And still yours.

What would that look like? What would it look like if I could guide all the parameters? If I really asked myself what I wanted, and wasn't afraid to tell him? Wasn't afraid it wouldn't be exactly what he wanted?

And so I start writing out my fantasies.

It's actually simple. I don't want a play-by-play.

I want you to surprise me. I want you to make it so I can't fight you. I want you to kiss me.

Hard limits?

I need to feel like you're with me. I don't want to feel alone again.

That feels vulnerable. Asking him to kiss me feels like it would be even more vulnerable. But he's only done it just that one night, and I crave it. I want a deeper connection.

What scares me is the isolation, what I crave is us.

And that feels frightening to ask for.

But he doesn't deny me.

The first step that I took, contacting a Dom, that was a step toward this. But it actually took all of these sessions with him. Getting to know him, being with him, to get me where I really needed to go.

To actually make it so that I can understand what this was about all along.

I needed everything to change.

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I needed to change.

I feel like maybe I finally have.

Chapter Eleven

Avery

I don't go to his house to work tomorrow. I do chores on the ranch, and carefully avoid my dad, and then I go upstairs and actually spend time getting myself ready.

Our sessions have been so caught up in the surprise of it all, in me working for him, that I haven't actually done this before. Haven't made myself smell nice for him. Haven't shaved and waxed just for the occasion. It's funny, because I enjoy the act of choosing sexier clothes for him, underwear. But I know it's not really what he's going to be after.

Because he likes me in his ropes, and nothing else is that. But what I hope he sees is the effort that I'm putting into him. To this fantasy.

To our time together.

Giving to him is good. It's easy, because of everything he gives to me. I don't have to draw a hard boundary around him for fear that he'll take advantage of me.

He won't. Because he cares what I want too much.

Because he needs my submission to be willing and enthusiastic, or he's a bully and not a Dominant, and he's definitely not a bully.

I feel like I'm more vulnerable tonight, which is maybe a silly thing. But I want something more. Something deeper. And it's not about doing the next, kinkier thing, but it's about exposing myself. What I want.

That's another thing I didn't fully appreciate about what I enjoy about submission. Him directing it means that I can't be rejected. I'm terrified of that. So much of what I do is about that fear of rejection. From not being the one to outline what's going to happen, to my reluctance to tell him when he's gone too far.

It's why it was so hard for me to tell him what my dreams were. Because when it comes to my dad, he doesn't care, because he cares about protecting his own interests. And with my mom it always just felt like abandonment. Like I personally wasn't enough, no matter what I did.

Those two things have tied themselves around me, but unlike his ropes, they've kept me bound in a way that doesn't serve me at all.

I'm done with that. I want to be free. I want to feel something more. Something better.

I finish getting ready and when I walk out of the house, I don't say anything to my dad at all.

When I arrive at his place it feels different somehow. I feel different. Like a shift has taken place inside of me. One that I know needed to happen. One that makes me feel frightened and liberated all at once.

I walk up the steps and open up the front door. I don't wait for him. He knows I'm

coming.

He's there, standing at the bottom of the stairs wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, that gorgeous body on display. I want to touch him everywhere. I want to put my hands all over him.

But I wait. Because even though this is my scene, it's all a very fine line. I have no desire to be in charge. I only have fantasies that I want fulfilled.

"Before we start," he says. "I want figure out where you're at today. Yesterday was very intense."

I nod. "It was. I've had a lot of time to think. About why I pushed so far outside my comfort zone. About what I needed to realize. About myself. About what my role is. And what I need to give to you."

"Really?"

"I'm not... I don't want to top from the bottom."

He laughed. "Maybe some other people feel differently about it, but to me that isn't sharing what you want. A submissive should always get what she wants. What she needs. Maybe it's not what you want in the moment, but it's what you need long term. You have to trust your Dom to let him do that."

"I do trust you. I understand what you were doing."

"Good."

"I told my dad that I'm not taking care of the ranch anymore. Not unless I get to be in charge of the money."

“Good for you.”

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“And I... I told him I might have to leave. But I can't keep the ranch running if he's not going to pull his weight. He thinks that I'm paying you off by fucking you.”

“Did he say that to you?” His eyes look dangerous.

“Yes. Not quite so crudely. But he did.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told him if that's his line then it's a weird one. Because he's happy to make me uncomfortable. But not in this way that makes him feel embarrassed.” I'm quiet for a moment. “I could only do that because of you. Because of this. You were right about me.”

“Some of the things that you asked for...”

“Are they outside your comfort zone?”

“A little bit,” he says.

“Do I need to give you a safe word?” I ask.

“I really will punish you for that,” he says.

I smile. “You are my alpha. My wolf. Whatever you want to do to me, I'm yours.”

His eyes go dark, and I shiver.

“I have big plans for you,” he says.

He takes my hand and leads me to the playroom. The lighting is dim, candles lit all over the room, the shades drawn. It’s different in there than usual. And there’s a large metal frame set up in the center of the room.

“You’ve done research,” he says. “Have you seen these?”

My heart flutters. “Yes.”

“You want to be closer. And you want to be free. I can set you free.” Those words on his lips scare me. I’m worried about what they mean, and at the same time I’m intrigued. “Tonight, I’m going to take my time with you.”

The words send a shiver down my spine. Because if that’s not what he’s been doing, then I am in big trouble. I’m in really big trouble.

In the best way.

“Kneel down for me,” he says.

He wants me on the floor. He’s not giving me the cushion of the bed, though it’s not quite the unbridled intensity of yesterday.

The carpet is soft enough, but I know that by design it’s going to put more pressure on my legs. But there is something about the sensation. About surrendering to him on that level. Trusting him.

The kinds of things that he’s doing can cause injuries if they aren’t executed correctly. And I’m trusting him on a profound level.

I kneel and the minute he loops the first rope around me, I know that he's back to the red ropes. He does that same knot around my neck that he did yesterday. Begins to work on a very similar body suit— though this one is more elaborate— with smaller diamonds of rope crossing my skin, going over my breasts, pressing them flat against my chest and pinching my nipples.

He doesn't do my hands immediately. Which is different. An interesting sensation, because I could reach up and stop him, but I don't want to. Still, there is an instinct in the body, a desire to defend and I have to suppress it, letting my hands relax as they sit on my thighs, as he works his methodical magic.

Then he leans in and kisses my mouth, soft and slow. And I find myself arching into him, that movement tightening the ropes on my nipples, making me grit my teeth to keep from crying out.

He pulls away from me, then ties my wrists. This time, there in front of me, entirely different to how he's done it in the past. They aren't pinned behind my back.

He leaves one long red cord, then moves behind me, reaches over my shoulder and grips ahold of that. I raise my bound wrists, my arms going on either side of my head as he pulls my wrists back behind my neck. Then he works that free end of the rope into what's already bound around my body, holding my arms up.

Though he's moving slower, more gently this time, he does the same technique on my legs. Winding rope around my thighs, all the way down my calves, before braiding them together so that my legs are locked in that kneeling position. Then he ties my thighs so they're forced wide, so that I'm entirely vulnerable to him.

There are ropes on the frame and that's when I find myself being lifted off the ground, bound to that frame. So that I'm suspended in the air, unable to move. I have to trust in his workmanship. The pressure points on my body are intense. The pull of

the rope pinching my nipples, holding my pussy wide, the intense, painful sensation making me moan with need. It feels like he's touching me, and yet I'm so aware that he's not.

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Everything is so good, and so terrible all at once.

The amount of time it's taken just for him to do the ropes is like a dream. A passing fantasy that I can't even begin to put into words, or nail down.

I'm weightless. I'm a creature made entirely by him, and yet, it was all by me too. I'm the one that made this happen. I'm the one who knew myself well enough to understand that this was where I needed to be.

And I trust him.

With all that I am. With everything that I want. I told him that I wanted something different. Something more intimate, and he's given me this. This ultimate showmanship of who he is and what he can do.

This profound show of trust, this opportunity for me to give him everything.

He stands behind me and holds me so that he's pressing against my hips. He pushes them, tilting them up, while my head begins to go down. And then he kisses me like that, with me upside down and him feasting on my mouth.

It makes me feel like I'm shining from the inside out. It makes me feel things I never thought possible. I'm so... Smug. Because what man can just do this? Can create whole worlds and performances out of his expression of sexual desire? Mine can.

My Dom. My Wolf.

And he does belong to me.

The idea of anyone else ever having him again makes me feel like I'm being tortured. I want to belong to him. I want him to belong to me. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything. And this is maybe why he hasn't kissed me all that much. He breaks that kiss, leaves me suspended upside down, and then stands. I'm very aware of him looking at me.

Then his fingers are on me, sliding through my slick folds as he pushes two fingers into me where I'm hanging upside down.

I can't close my legs.

Can't control the movements in any capacity. And I don't want to. With one hand, he undoes his belt, opens up his jeans, and frees his cock. My mouth is just at the right level, and I take him in as best I can as he leans in and sucks my clit into his mouth. I can't say that I've ever been a big fan of this position. Laying down, it's cumbersome. A working vacation, I've heard it called, and I think that's fair.

But not like this. I'm weightless. He tastes delicious. His tongue on me is a revelation, and I find myself spiraling into a galaxy of pleasure.

He pumps two fingers inside me as he continues to lick me, and I lose control of myself completely, crying out my pleasure as I come hard around his fingers.

He moves away from me, taking that beautiful cock away from me too, and I protest.

"Not yet," he says. "You have to earn it."

I whimper.

“Such an impatient, greedy girl you are,” he says.

I feel it as a compliment. I feel it race through my whole body.

He tilts me so that I’m upright, the ropes now pulling hard against my pussy, and I whimper from the pain of it—my lips held open, my clit feeling swollen, sensitive, and exposed.

The orgasm that I just had has made me even more sensitive, and I can barely breathe.

“Be patient,” he says.

He doesn’t touch me. He stands there, looking at me. Moves around me, looks at my body from every angle, and I feel it like a touch. Then he grabs hold of my hair and pulls me back so that I’m on my back, balanced perfectly, suspended in the air.

His hand still in my hair, he leans in and kisses my mouth, gripping my face with his other hand, claiming me deep and hard as he does. Then he moves so he’s standing in front of me, his cock hard and proud, such a massive turn on.

He grips my hips and brings me toward him, thrusting that hard shaft through my slick lips. Before he finally, finally takes me. He thrusts in, hard, and starts fucking me like it’s the thing he’s been waiting for. Like it’s the thing he wants most in the world. It’s all too much. Being held weightless— but also his body, hard and uncompromising as he pounds into me. It’s perfect. Wild, and utterly erotic.

And then, as he continues to fuck me, he reaches and grabs my hair. He tilts me up so he can kiss me, his tongue thrusting between my lips as his cock moves inside my pussy, so good that I can’t stand it.

I break apart. Shatter into a million pieces. And he comes, hot and slick inside me, continuing to thrust even afterward, the intensity of it sending aftershocks through my body.

He looks at me, his eyes wild and fierce. I see something there that I've never seen before.

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He wants to keep me.

My heart soars with hope. With need.

He wants to keep me, and I want to be kept. There are so many other things that I want too, but he's the one that made me realize I was stuck.

He's the one that made me realize I needed this.

He takes me down from the apparatus slowly, lowers me to the ground, but he doesn't cut me free from the ropes this time. No. It's a slow unwinding, as much a part of the process as the tying. Then he gathers me up close, like he has so many times before. But he doesn't rush to get me a blanket. He holds me against him until his heart rate returns to normal. Until mine does. And then he picks me up off the ground. And carries me out of the playroom. And into his bedroom.

Chapter Twelve

Caleb

I'm breaking all my rules for her.

I'm bringing her into my bed, into my room. Into my life. But I realize then that this is what has to happen. I realize then that this isn't just a game that we are playing on an app, it isn't just another Dom/sub matchup, a chance to play a few scenes before we part.

It's not just me training another sub and showing her how BDSM works.

I can never give her to another Dom.

I can never give her to anybody.

She's mine.

With her, I found something different inside myself. I want to take care of her. I want to take a chance with her. I have never believed that anyone would ever stay with me. It's hard for me to believe that she might. That there's something in me that she'll think is good enough for her to want to keep me.

But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because I would take every risk for her. That's how it's been, from the moment I first saw her. When I found out that her father was going to lose the ranch and I bought up all those acres to mitigate it.

From the beginning, I've been doing it for her. At first because I saw something mirrored in her that I saw in myself. But now because I see her. In all her lovely, perfect state. This woman with the wonderful capacity to give, who needs someone who won't take advantage of that. Who will give to her. Who will lighten her load. Honor her power by testing his own against her.

I have everything. Money, power, and it's a cliché, but the one thing I haven't been able to buy for myself is love. But now there's her. There's her, and as I feel her against my chest and hold her in bed, I know that I'll do whatever I have to in order to keep her.

Chapter Thirteen

Avery

When I wake up, he's holding me. I cover his hand with mine, and I close my eyes. I think about us. About our lives. About the way we've been treated. About the people who have left us, used us. The people who are lost to us. We don't have to keep choosing that. We don't have to keep modeling our abandonment over and over again.

"You're awake," he says, his voice gruff against my cheek.

"Yes," I say.

"I have some things I need to say to you. I'll pay for you to go anywhere in the world. To go to any school you want. To do any rodeo circuit you want. I'll buy you a new horse, a new trailer. New clothes. Whatever you want. Whatever you need to go do with your life, I want you to go do it. Do you need to try another Dom for a while? Whatever you need. Nothing will disqualify you from being with me. There is nothing that you can do to lose me."

I jolt against him. "Are you serious?"

"Avery, I love you. I think I've loved you for a long time. I love the way that you're made for me. My perfect woman, my perfect submissive. Sweet and feisty and you fit me. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Only you. You're twenty-four, and I don't want you to feel trapped. My dove is not meant to be in a cage."

I put my hand on his face, my heart beating hard. "I don't feel like I'm in a cage. The freest I've ever felt is when you tie me up."

He growls, kissing me, deep and unrestrained. There is no protocol. There is no dance. No choreography. He's just over me, and in me, and claiming me with all the need between the two of us.

When he finishes, we're both breathing hard, my throat raw from how many times I've screamed out my orgasm in the last two days.

This is not going to be a quiet life.

I don't want one.

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I thought that every day was going to be a grind. The same as the last. Me riding on an exercise bike, pedaling endlessly and never getting anywhere. But there's him. And all this magic that we've made together.

"I'm going to buy the ranch from your father," he says.

"Caleb..."

"I'm going to buy it from him and I'm going to make sure that it's run properly. He'll always have a place to stay. He's never going to be out on his own. Between the two of us, we can keep him managed. But it should never be all up to you."

"That's more than generous."

"I love you," he says.

He's said it twice. I haven't said it back. I can't remember the last time I said it to anyone. Can't remember the last time they said it to me. It takes me a moment to realize that tears are tracking down my cheeks.

"I love you," I say. "This is such a strange, miraculous thing. How is it that we could be made for each other like this? How is it that you're here? That you're mine."

"I've been told that life has miracles in it. All the time. A lot of people told me it was a miracle that I made the kind of money I did. I guess that's true. But it never felt like a miracle to me. This does. You're the miracle that I've been waiting for, Avery Carmichael. I never knew what to say when people asked what brought me the most

joy. I know they were looking for answers about all the money. All the luxury things I can afford and do. It's you. You are my happiness."

I lean my head against his shoulder, and this moment is like a trust fall. For both of us, I think. This deep certainty, that we are supposed to be together. That we'll continue to be together.

That we can trust the love we found between us.

I know we can.

I love Caleb Flynn. As much as I ever thought I hated him.

But I think the real problem was, I never knew what love was supposed to look like.

And now I do. Thanks to him.

"Oh, Dove," he says. "I've got plans for you today."

"What are they?"

"I have a lot of meetings today. I'm going to sell this company off. So that I can travel with you. So that I can follow you wherever you need to go. To whatever school you want to go to, to your rodeos."

I smile, because I'm not sure which of those things I'm going to do. Maybe all of them. Yeah. Maybe all of them.

"And you're going to spend all that time tied up under my desk paying attention to my cock."

I smile.

Oh yeah. I'm made for him.

Maybe this wouldn't be everyone's version of love. But it's ours.

And that's just right for me.