



For the Night

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: The Game Series, #15 • FF • Hurt Comfort • Friendship • Found Family • D/s • S/m • Brat prank • TPE Event

Mistress Penelope Darling has spent the past ten years cherishing the Mclean House community she once founded with her closest friends. All of them gay men, most of them viewing her as a bossy little sister to be reckoned with. She's also been in a loving relationship with her girlfriend—or so she thought.

After finding out her sub cheated on her, Penelope gets rid of everything. Her home, all the knickknacks, every picture...the girlfriend, of course. Her new plan is to never, ever be in a relationship again. She's going to be a for-the-night Domme. Good for casual fun and friendship. That's it.

Enter Nora Lilja. A new member. A ballsy young woman. A primal brat. A breath of fresh air with an angel on one shoulder and an irresistible devil on the other.

Penelope surrounds herself with friends and distractions. It's a big month, with parties and events to plan. A cute newbie won't break her resolve. Even when that girl turns out to be very, very persuasive, going so far as to claim she doesn't want Penelope for the night. She wants a shot at forever.

The Game Series is a BDSM series where romance meets the reality of kink. Sometimes we fall for someone we don't match with, sometimes vanilla business gets in the way of kinky pleasure, and sometimes we have to compromise and push ourselves to overcome trauma and insecurities. No matter what, one thing is certain. This is not a perfect world—and maybe that's why the happily ever after feels so good.

The characters in the Game Series cross over in multiple books, as we follow not only new love interests but the background friendships and dynamics of a thriving kink community.

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CHAPTER ONE

Penelope Darling

“Honey, I love you, but I’m never helpin’ you move again.” Reese draped a sweaty arm around my shoulders, and I chuckled breathlessly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’mma take off all my clothes and jump in the pool.”

“Sounds cold.” We’d just opened up the pool a couple days ago.

Reese smirked down at me. “That’s why God gave me eight inches of dick. There’s room for shrinkage.”

Ugh. I made a face and shoved at him, and he laughed.

While he jogged off to cool down on the other side of the house, I trailed up the porch steps and reached River as he lit up two smokes.

“You weren’t kiddin’ about a fresh start,” he noted, handing me one.

“It’s all or nothing.” I nodded in thanks and took a drag, glancing over at my truck.

It was full, and that was the last of it.

The condo had been sold. All the furniture too—or donated. And I’d emptied my cabin out here at Mclean as well. New shit was arriving tomorrow.

I exhaled some smoke and felt a sense of peace settling over me.

Definitely a fresh start. Great timing too. Spring was giving way to early summer, and the football-field-sized front lawn was bright green and dotted with white and yellow flowers.

Coincidentally, I was also in between jobs. I started my new position in a month, and until then, I was just gonna enjoy some time off.

“So what’s next?” River walked over to the seating area, and I followed and aimed for the other sofa. “You gonna try to find a new condo right away?”

I’d thought about it, but... “I think I’ll ride out the summer in the cabin.” Besides, it was my turn next to help River, Reese, and Shay move in to their new house up the road in a few weeks. It’d be nice to be close by for that. And honestly, I didn’t wanna be alone anymore. I’d had months of moping and raging.

Ella was out of my life, and now I was ready for barbecue nights, pool days, and events.

I wanted to live again.

I wanted to be close to my friends.

“It’ll be a good summer.” River leaned back and kicked up his feet on the dusty coffee table. “The brats are on crack. We won’t be bored.”

I grinned and took another drag.

I’d heard about the brat shenanigans. River, Reese, and several others had just come home from a cruise, and the Tops were all up in arms about something the brats had

planned. No one knew yet, though River had a solid theory he'd shared with me.

We fell into a comfortable silence, and I reveled in the serenity. This was the right move for me. Fuck love and relationships and all that nonsense. I was going to spend this summer—and presumably the rest of my life—just chilling with my second family here at our kink haven. A big, three-story Victorian filled with torture devices and bright, sadistic minds.

In a way, the seven men I'd started this community with were all my brothers. We were completely different and yet all the same. Greer was the big oaf, the gentle giant, the former Marine, the Master who got on my case for smoking occasionally. Macklin was everybody's little brother, who was also one of the kindest. River and Reese were my partners in crime. River and I could sit like this and do nothing. Reese took me to the shooting range when he felt I needed to blow off some steam.

Lucas was the fussy. He took me out to lunch and brunch and coffee dates to check up on me. His man Colt sent me memes, Spotify links, and actual steaks.

And Lucian...the stiffest of them all. The high-protocol Master who'd turned into a teddy bear since getting together with his foursome... He was kinda like Lucas lately, actually. In his own way.

I didn't need anybody else, did I? I had them and their partners.

"Are you gonna be here this weekend?" I asked, putting out my smoke in an old coffee mug.

River made a face. "I don't know. I have half a mind to distract Reese and Shay with a hike or somethin'."

Yeah, that sounded like him. Not only was it Easter this weekend, but some members

had decided to host a play party for kinksters interested in exploring new fetishes. Events like that attracted newbies and people on the prowl for hookups and eternal love.

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“You?” he asked.

I blew out a breath. “I’d like to say fuck Easter and the bunny it rode in on, but I signed up to cover Lucian’s DM shift.”

Lucian had finally realized he was completely burned out a few weeks ago, so we’d come together to remove him from monitor duty. He wasn’t allowed to host events for a while either, including our monthly Game.

“Have fun with all the newbies,” River drawled.

I stuck out my tongue at him.

He smirked and clasped his hands behind his head.

Whatever. I could survive one Easter weekend with giggling newbies and jumping in whenever someone got too reckless. This was part of the lifestyle we’d signed up for. We welcomed everyone, even though our personalities, to some degree, screamed “Get off my porch.”

At least I’d have Lucas and Colt with me. They’d volunteered to be dungeon monitors too. Oh, and Ash. I’d tricked him into coming out here for a drink or two. Since the cruise had been an all-sausage-fest affair, I hadn’t gotten my chance to catch up with him yet. He’d returned to our community after a year’s absence following his separation from the unofficial leader of our bondage crowd.

If anyone asked me, those two just needed to figure their shit out and get back

together. I was by no means a romantic, but they were two halves of a whole. Dumbass dudes who refused to communicate when they got hurt.

I woke up the next morning with a sore neck, after having spent the night in one of the guest rooms in the main house.

Thank fuck my new bed was arriving today. I'd timed the delivery for later when I knew more members would be around, because I had every intention of bribing brats with donuts, candy, and pizza if they helped me carry everything inside.

After a shower, I changed into a pair of leggings and a too-big denim shirt—fairly sure I'd stolen it from Colt at some point—and I tied a belt around my waist. Perfect dress.

In my defense, his idea of sampling my baked goods whenever I orchestrated a bake sale or brought dessert to an event was to take half of it for himself.

"I'm just tastin'!" he'd say with his mouth full and sticky with frosting.

I'd earned this shirt.

My messy hair ended up in a haphazard bun at the top of my head, and then I was ready to face the day in big shades and pink flip-flops.

I headed downstairs and trailed through the empty club area till I reached the terrace doors. The deck with all its tables and barbecue area and two hot tubs was deserted, but I spotted a familiar Tenley swimming laps in the pool. Shay was reading a book in one of the loungers too.

Just as I walked outside, River came out from their cabin with a cup of coffee, and he nodded in his silent way of saying good morning.

It was going to be hot today.

The six founders' cabins formed a neat row along the western perimeter, leading down to the forest where we liked to host takedown events and primal play. It'd been a long fucking time since I'd joined. Ella hadn't really been into primal kinks. A masochist through and through, but not for the adrenaline. Pain had brought her peace and emotional release.

I loved both.

I missed the chase, the playfulness of a brat, and the constant push and pull.

I bundled up my laundry under my arm and crossed the deck, and I jumped down onto the grass right around the time Reese slapped a hand on the wall of the pool and panted out, "Fifty."

"Okay, Daddy," Shay snorted in amusement. "I counted thirty-eight."

River and I exchanged a smirk.

Reese huffed. "Then you definitely need to go back to school, you little bratfuck."

"I'm studying!" was Shay's defense, and he left his lounge and nodded at me. "I've been waiting for Mistress Penelope."

Oh?

"Good morning, Ma'am." He jogged my way as I moseyed toward my cabin. It was the fifth one, nestled in between Greer's and Macklin's.

"Morning, pet."

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He sidled up next to me and showed me the book he was reading. Environmental rezoning. All right.

“So from one engineer to another—in the same field, technically—I wanna pretend to discuss this book for two reasons,” he said. “For one, I’m still struggling to find the motivation to go back and get my master’s, but it means a lot to River and Reese that I try. And two...it’s possible I’m up to no good.”

I side-eyed him. “And you thought it was a good idea to casually mention that to one of the toppy Sadists around?”

“A genius idea, actually, which I won’t take full credit for,” he answered. “Two things can happen here. You rat me out, and I take my punishment. No biggie. It won’t make any headlines. But the chance of you actually teaming up with me...? No one will suspect that.”

He had my attention.

I motioned for the book, and he extended it. If this was going to continue, we’d need to keep up the charade.

“I’m listening,” I said. I flipped to a random page somewhere in the middle, and then a few more pages. At the same time, we slowed down because we’d reached my cabin. “What’s your plan?”

“We fuck with both the Sadists and the brats,” he told me bluntly. “We pit them against each other.”

A spark of giddiness buzzed through me—I couldn't deny it.

Shay truly was a smart opportunist. In the last year, a heated debate over our community's name had sparked more than one attack from either side; we had the brats claiming House Mclean sounded way better, whereas most of us Tops, and particularly those of us who'd actually founded the community, remained firm on Mclean House.

I'd never observed Shay taking a stand on the issue, and no wonder. He waited for the right cards to play. And right now, we had the perfect storm brewing because of that dumb debate. The Sadists were on high alert, and the brats were scheming.

I dropped my gaze to the book, and Shay casually traced two fingers along a paragraph.

"Who else is with you?" I asked.

"Nobody."

I quirked a brow at him. "You said the idea wasn't entirely yours."

"True," he conceded. "But once this person sort of threw out the idea, I made no mention or showed any sign that I might run with it."

I hummed. "I want to know who it is, just so that I have all the facts."

Shay had several friends at Mclean, though he was particularly close with Tate, Lane, Ivy, and Gretchen.

"Does that mean you're in?" he asked hopefully.

He was cute. A bad-boy-looking young man with tons of tattoos, one with a tough exterior, but River and Reese—probably mostly Reese—had drawn out a sweet Middle who wasn't afraid to show his emotions.

“Unless the unknowing coconspirator raises red flags,” I answered.

First and foremost, however, Shay was a primal bottom who paid attention to how his behavior might look to others. Like his Owners. As he considered my demand, he didn't fidget or glance over at River and Reese; he kept up with the act and flipped to another chapter in the book.

“Okay, fair,” he decided. “It was Nora.” Goddammit. “We were talking about pranks and mindfucks, and she mentioned the ultimate one would be to find a Top to team up with since the sides are so divided. We never hear about Sadists suspecting Sadists, and so on.”

“And you just breezed right by that?” To be honest, I wished Nora had never joined us. She'd only been here roughly a month, maybe two, and she was already turning heads. She was making me react, and I didn't fucking do that. Not to a virtual stranger. Far as I knew, we'd never actually spoken beyond introductions, so I had no reason to have her occupy space in my mind.

“Yes, Ma'am,” Shay replied firmly. “At most, she will suspect me once we get started—definitely not you. Not a founding member. Given she's close with Lane, maybe she'll suspect Ty or Master McKenna.”

That sounded logical. Lane was also one of Macklin's partners, because apparently all my closest friends out here had to create poly-houses and harems. Walker, or Master McKenna, and Ty were the co-Tops of both Macklin and Lane, and their cabin was right next to mine. It would do me good to observe the brat aspects in their dynamic some more. Macklin was a wild card. As a switch, he was an opportunist,

much like Shay. Lane was 100% primal prey. A ballsy, funny, and sweet addition to our community. Ty...? Pure hedonist. And Walker certainly had a devil on his shoulder too.

“Okay. I’m in.”

He smiled, his blue eyes lighting up. “This is gonna be fucking epic.”

I chuckled and closed the book. “I wouldn’t join for anything less. Let’s meet up over lunch in town after the weekend. Out here, your Owners are always watching.”

He nodded. “It’s a plan. I’m supposed to help my youngest brother with a school project on Monday anyway, so anything before three would be great.”

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Then let's get this show on the road.

Shay took a few steps back, ready to return to River and Reese, when I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

"Hey, Shay?"

He turned back to me.

"If you're struggling to go back to school, don't force it," was my genuine advice. "Before I got my master's, I took two years off because my mind was fried."

He grew pensive but nodded a little. "I feel like my time is running out. I'm already gonna be older than most when?—"

I spluttered in surprise. "You're what, twenty-five, twenty-six? You have all the time in the world, sweetie."

He grinned ruefully. "You sound like the Tenleys."

"Well. They're known to say smart things occasionally."

He chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind."

By noon, I'd finished cleaning my cabin. I'd pushed bags of clothes up the stairs to the otherwise empty sleeping loft, and I'd filled a final trash bag with remnants from Ella. A few tops, the last of her knickknacks, her favorite coffee mugs, and whatnot.

According to Lucian and Reese, Ella was evidently coming back to the community after her hasty exit last Christmas when I'd caught her cheating. She'd gone home to Philly the moment I'd told her I wasn't fucking taking her back or forgiving her, and now she was supposedly a paying member again.

It didn't matter. She was out of my life.

I spent the next couple hours in Tysons, running errands, visiting another type of sadist at my waxing place, stocking up on brat bribes—not at the waxing place—getting my nails done... Again, I should say. I'd tried to go back to my usual dark-red nails the other week, but I wasn't happy. So goodbye to those, and hello, pale, semitransparent peach. They were much shorter too. It felt weird but good. I needed to shake things up in my life, and I'd been so set in my latex-and-corset ways that most of my friends had lifted brows and made comments when I'd started showing up in jeans, All Stars, and hoodies. I'd even dyed my hair, despite it was only two shades darker. More auburn than red.

The six-inch heels weren't going anywhere. I still loved my kinky outfits—plus, they made me feel less fun-sized in a community of giants. But in my everyday life, I was itching to kick back and explore the world of pajama shorts, loose tees, and flip-flops.

Before I headed back to Mclean, I had lunch and texted Walker a request for some new toys. His work with leather, glass, and silicone had turned me into a happy customer.

Minutes later, I wrestled all my shopping bags into the back of the truck, and I sent off a text to Tate too. I wanted to put together a new aftercare kit, and he was a wealth of knowledge. He and Kingsley played hard, so Tate knew how to look after bruises and cuts.

By the time I was at Mclean again, more cars had filled the large carport. I arrived at

the same time Colt, Lucas, and Kit did, and they were quick to offer me assistance.

Colt grabbed three of the bags and eyed my shirt. "That looks familiar."

"It's called denim, Wyatt Earp," I replied. "I think it's catching on."

Something that wasn't catching on was his mustache. I just couldn't get used to it.

Lucas and Kit laughed.

Colt narrowed his eyes at me. "You're a fuckin' brat sometimes."

I puckered my lips at him. He was one to talk. He, Greer, and Reese were three of the biggest brats known to man.

Kit gasped. "Oh! Mistress Penelope, this bag is full of candy!"

I smiled at him and nudged his shoulder with my own. "Go ahead, grab something. It'll be our secret. But your Daddies decide when you can eat it."

He was so fucking cute. He got all excited and dug through the bag, ultimately deciding between Pop Rocks and a packet of Nerds.

The Nerds won.

"Thank you so much, Ma'am!" He shook the packet and looked up expectantly at his Owners. "May I eat them now, please?"

Colt and Lucas looked on, amused, and Lucas was first to offer a nod.

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“But you promise to eat all your veggies later,” Colt added. “Otherwise, I’ll have Luke bitchin’ at me.”

I coughed to hide a laugh.

Lucas scowled instead. “Because that’s why he needs to eat his greens? Honestly, Colt.”

Kit giggled. “I promise!” Before he was off, he told me he’d put the big bag of candy on my porch.

That worked for me.

In the meantime, I walked ahead of Colt and Lucas, who went through their version of a fight. Like so many times before. Lucas stressed the importance of Kit eating something other than sugar; Colt apologized and literally forbade Lucas from being mad at him. Then it was time for me to tune out because Colt promised to make Lucas smile the way “only a Texan can” in the bedroom later. And Lucas was a big enough slut to fall for it.

I wasn’t sure Ella and I had ever been that sickeningly in love. We’d had a wonderful kink dynamic, where we’d lived and breathed devotion, but in the months following our breakup, I’d started realizing I’d been missing signs pointing to something that had been missing. The vanilla aspects couldn’t measure up to the kind of love I saw between many of my friends.

It was just my luck that I’d become single during what was turning into the Mclean

House summer of love. Colt and Lucas were getting married and planning a second ceremony to include Kit. Tate and Kingsley were also getting hitched—plus they were expecting a kid this fall. Their surrogate was pregnant.

Lucian had proposed to Cam during the cruise...

River, Reese, and Shay were moving in together in a brand-new house.

Greer had found his happiness with three partners, and the four not only lived together on his little farm, they had a bunch of kids too.

Ivy was pregnant, happily sandwiched in her triad with two men.

Macklin had been reunited with his husband Walker, and the two had built a second dynamic with Ty and Lane.

So many different types of relationships, yet they all had one thing in common. The fierce love and loyalty.

I needed Ash to get here so we could be miserable together.

“Your headliner has arrived!”

Hello, Noa.

I yawned and stretched out across my lounge. I’d opted for a double lounge because Ash had asked me to save him a spot. He’d be here soon with pizza. We were gonna talk shit about everyone together.

“Hiii!” Kit climbed out of the pool. “Are you gonna change—never mind.” He laughed, presumably because Noa was already busy throwing off his clothes.

Lucian, KC, and Cam came out too, and they sighed at their wild boy.

“I’m not picking that up, freckles,” KC told him. “Leave your clothes in the cabin before you jump in.”

“I can’t hear you, Daddy!” Noa sprinted across the deck, down past the loungers, and dove right in, naked as the day he was born.

I chuckled under my breath, glad I’d picked the other side of the pool. It was less of a splash zone.

Kingsley and Tate were dozing off in the lounge next to mine, River was snoring softly in another, while Reese and Shay prepared snacks, Lucas was scrolling on his phone, and Jack and Franklin were reading a book together in the corner.

Colt manned the grill, ready to sling hot dogs and burgers to those interested, and a handful of others were grouped off across the deck. Country music was playing, so Colt was clearly in charge there too.

I checked my phone. Furniture delivery in a little over an hour.

I’d break the news to the brats soon.

Ty and Lane were next to show up, having already changed into trunks and matching Ray-Bans.

Another couple who looked so damn in love.

Ash and I would talk shit about them too.

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We weren't bitter or anything.

"At long last!" Colt turned to Ty and Lane. The first two worked together; they used to be in the Air Force, and now they ran a security company. Though, technically, Colt was still a pilot. He'd never let anyone forget it either. Nor did Kit. When Colt was at Langley for one reason or another, Kit shouted it to the world.

"What's this?" Colt eyed a container Lane had brought.

"It's nothing you would like, Sir," Lane responded.

Ty smirked and unwrapped what looked like two steaks. He placed them on the grill.

"Y'all got somethin' against my burgers?" Colt challenged.

"You already forced fried chicken down my throat earlier," Ty bitched. "Lemme have my steak and fuckin' salad."

I grinned to myself. I loved watching our members go at one another. More often than not, they were bickering family members rather than friends.

"Salad," Colt scoffed. "On a goddamn Friday."

I tuned them out when I finally spotted a familiar face in the doorway. Ash was another gentle giant with a primal mind, and he'd come straight from work, only stopping to get us a pizza.

I automatically sat up and raised my hand, and his gaze landed on me. His tired smile said everything. But unlike me, he stood every chance at winning his hubby back.

He greeted everyone on the way, and he detached the suspenders of his utility clothes.

“Hi, Mister Ash!” Noa waved from the pool.

“Hey, kiddo.” Ash had a grin for everybody, but those close to him could see through it.

I was prepared. I had a shoulder he could cry on, and I had a cooler for us. Iced tea for me, beer for him.

I rose to my feet and adjusted my bikini top, and then I got the first waft of melted cheese and pepperoni. Fuck yeah. Comfort food.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” He dropped the pizza box on the lounge, and then he enveloped me in a bear hug.

I let out a breath and locked my arms around his neck. “Ditto, honey. How are you?”

“I have Sinead O’Connor on repeat in the truck—what do you think?”

I winced and held him a little tighter.

“Everything sucks,” he muttered.

“I know.”

He pressed a kiss to my temple before ending the hug, and I?—

“Are you okay, Sir?” I heard Tate ask.

Ash gave him a polite smile. “Don’t crash our pity party, pet.”

Some subs might recoil and offer space, but Tate wasn’t one of those.

He sat up straighter and squinted for the sun. “With all due respect, Sir, Macklin and I have our own MO when someone’s down. I will drown you in care packages.”

“He’s not kidding,” I said unnecessarily. It was one of the reasons it was impossible to hold a scowl in Tate’s direction. When he and Kingsley had broken up last year, I’d been quick to offer Tate a place to stay—for all the times he’d cheered me up when Ella and I had had a fight. Except, fight was the wrong word. We’d had...periods when we didn’t communicate.

Eventually, Tate and Kingsley had found their way back to each other. Much like Ash and Nathan should.

“You know what I like,” was Ash’s response. “I heard about your care package to Lucian. That sounds nice—without scented candles.”

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“Consider it done,” Tate replied. “For the record, that scented candle has a calming effect.”

“So do horse tranquilizers. You got any’a those?” Ash retorted.

Tate smiled sympathetically. “I’ll see what I can find.”

I tugged on Ash’s hand, then sat down on the lounge again, and Tate soon returned to Kingsley’s embrace.

Ash moved one of the umbrellas over to us while I flipped open the pizza box and grabbed a cold beer for him. More ice for my glass too.

“You’re an angel,” he said.

“So are you. A shameless one.” I felt the need to add the last part as he stripped down to boxer briefs.

I was so used to it. The men out here couldn’t spell modesty.

“To Sinead O’Connor,” I said, holding up my glass of iced tea. A drop of condensation fell on my thigh.

He chuckled tiredly and clinked his bottle with my glass.

I didn’t push him immediately, wanting him to get a breather and at least have a slice. But I was ready for answers. He’d left our community so suddenly after he and

Nathan had broken up, and even though he'd stayed in touch with some of us, he'd made it clear that certain topics were off-limits.

The few times I'd met up with Ash the last year, he'd been a sneak. AKA, his kids had been nearby.

His chest and right arm were graced with countless dedications to his family. To Nathan too. The date they'd met, the day they'd gotten married, all four kids' birthdays, their favorite toys—particularly LEGO for Mikey, who was obsessed. Four baby bottles, lyrics, road trip destinations from their summer vacations... Only a few subtle hints that were kink-related. A bundle of rope because Nathan was a rigger. A collection of knives. The silhouette of a forest in the background, whispering of Ash's love for primal takedowns.

"Lucian told me you moved," I mentioned, taking a bite of my pizza slice.

He nodded once and chewed. "Yeah, I was a dumbass. I pretty much bought Nate's dream house, hoping it would remind him of our old hopes to get outta the city and have a big backyard."

I lifted my brows.

He shook his head to himself. "He told me to go fuck myself."

That...didn't sound like Nathan. "In those words?"

Ash shrugged. "He got all mad—like he couldn't form any words, and he shook his head at me and said he couldn't believe I'd done that."

That sounded like Nathan.

“It’s his way of telling me to go fuck myself,” he finished.

I wasn’t so sure, though I didn’t know Nathan that well. The bondage community was its own tight-knit group, always had been, so we’d been closer with Ash. But even so...

“You know him best,” I made sure to say first. “But from an outside perspective? I think he could be hurt. Maybe he just saw you moving forward with plans that used to belong to you as a couple.”

“Except, I told him I wanted him to consider givin’ us a try again,” he said.

Oh.

“When was this?” I wondered.

“Before the holidays. That’s when I moved in.”

Got it.

So a sensitive time of year...with a family split in two after they’d celebrated so many Christmases together...

Come to think about it, it might’ve been their second holiday apart. I wasn’t sure—but I had a more pressing question.

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“Are you ever gonna tell me what eventually caused the breakup?” I reached for another slice.

He sighed. “Can’t we leave it at, it was my fault?”

I didn’t believe that for a second. Several of us knew the gist of their problems, and they’d struggled for at least a couple of years, on and off, before they’d split. As a vanilla couple, they’d aced everything together, so they’d taken frequent breaks from kink, where they had very little in common.

I supposed that one bothered me the most. Because for as much as I needed BDSM in my life and identified with my core kinks, I couldn’t imagine a situation where I saw no solution—as long as I felt so strongly for my partner outside of the playroom.

“I pushed him too hard,” Ash admitted. “I felt like we were falling apart, so I lost my shit. I pissed him off at every turn to get him to explode, and in the end, I asked him to choose between kink and our family.”

I winced.

Maybe not the smoothest move, but what caged animal reacted rationally?

“I wanted us to walk away from kink,” he said. “Nate was sure I’d be miserable and grow to resent him. So...” He swallowed hard and tossed the crust back into the box. “I said I was done. I spent that night at my brother’s house, and then I found a place to rent shortly after.”

Fuck. It hurt to hear about it. Way more than when I thought about my own relationship ending, actually. Further proving Ella and I hadn't been doing okay for a long time.

"I'm so sorry, Ash."

"Yeah, me too." He chugged his beer.

I glanced across the pool at Colt and Kit, and Lucas was on his way to join them.

Colt and Lucas had once faced similar problems, in that they were both Doms. They'd been together for nearly a decade before Kit had completed their dynamic, though Colt and Lucas had tried before. No one had gotten close. Colt and Lucas had constantly put each other first, mending every cut before it could get infected.

For Ash and Nathan... Things hadn't worked out that way. But they had kids, and including another man in that way of life wasn't the same. Even less so because they didn't really consider themselves poly.

"Hey, isn't that the Swedish girl who's got a crush on you?"

Goddammit. I followed his gaze, immediately knowing he'd spotted Nora somewhere. Sure enough, she'd just joined Ty and Lane at a table on the deck.

I knitted my brows together and eyed Ash. "How do you know about her?"

"Reese mentioned her on the cruise when I asked who Shay was close with," he said. "We were discussing the brats' ongoing scheming, but we ruled out most brats who weren't there." He tipped his bottle toward Nora. "I heard she's new here and joined partly because of you."

I sighed, wishing we could circle back to the previous topic. “She doesn’t know what she wants. She’s young.”

She’d sent me a friend request online after she’d joined us, and I’d declined it. In my defense, I only befriended people in our forum if I already knew them from having interacted with them in real life.

Two friends, Reese and Santiago, had given me a heads-up about her so-called crush.

NoraOfTheNorth was her username. She looked like a petite goth girl, maybe an inch or so shorter than my own five-four. According to her profile, she was a primal brat and submissive, “strictly lesbian, no DMs from dudes about play,” with approximately fourteen exclamation points.

She was fucking adorable. And beautiful. Very much so. But she was barking up the wrong tree. If she wanted a night of casual play, fine by me. No more than that. I was done with relationships.

“How young?” Ash asked.

“Twenty-four, I think.”

He snorted. “So she’s the same age as pretty much all the partners of our cradle-robbin’ friends.”

I grinned, unable to help it. He had me there. Most of us founding members were around forty, except for Macklin. He was in his early thirties—his hubby was, however, older. The rest of them had found younger men in their early- to mid-twenties.

Ash turned to me. “What were you doing when you were twenty-four?”

I bit off a chunk of crust and scowled at him.

He smiled. “You could vote, drink, decide what you were gonna do for the rest of your life, but you couldn’t possibly be trusted with a girlfriend?”

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“Shut up,” I said.

In reality, she wasn’t too young. I was too old. I turned forty in less than two months, and I wished I could go back in time and redo the last ten. And completely erase Ella.

My phone buzzed, and I swiped it from the side table and saw I had an update about my delivery. “Fuck.” They were almost here. “Excuse me, I gotta engage in brat labor.” I wiped pizza grease off my fingers and then stood up on the lounge.

“Huh?” Ash was confused.

“PSA to all brats!” I called out over the pool area. I immediately had about fifteen heads snapping my way. “I have a furniture delivery in about twenty minutes! Everyone who helps me carry the stuff into my cabin will be bribed with a ton of sugar and free drinks at the bar tonight!”

Kit gasped and stood up. “It’s true! I saw one of the bags she brought earlier, and it was full of donuts and candy!”

“I’m in!” Noa yelled. “I’m super strong—punch me as hard as you can in the abs. You’ll see!”

I laughed and blew him a kiss. “Maybe I’ll punch you later, sweetheart.”

He grinned like a dope.

In the end, I had seven volunteers. Kit, Noa, Shay, Lane, Cam, Tate, and...Nora.

CHAPTER TWO

Nora Lilja

Of course Lane had to make a comment to the Tops who helped Penelope.

“Sirs, do you identify as brats?” he teased.

Colt, Kingsley, Ash, and Ty gave him appropriate looks of “Watch it, brat.”

“Or, our mamas raised us up right,” Colt retorted.

“Also, don’t cut off the hand that carries the couch, wild fry,” Ty told his boy.

I snickered under my breath and picked up another box. Judging by the illustration on the cardboard, this was going to be a floor lamp once assembled.

The delivery guys had just left everything by the carport out front, so it was a long trek with each box. On grass. The Mclean property was huge, a stark contrast to what I was used to in my previous community. We’d had a loft space in Alexandria, and thirty people had filled the room.

I kept my head down and trailed along the side of the house, another thing that was huge. Three stories of club area, bar, guest rooms, playrooms, changing room, kitchen... They had their own rope dojo too. Their own freaking forest—at the bottom of the lawn in the back.

I’d been a member of their online forum for about a year, and one thing hadn’t changed. My confusion regarding Penelope’s role here. Because it focused so heavily on gay men, and yet she was one of the Founders. In fact, she was the only woman in a position of power out here. The lesbian community was tiny; I’d stumbled across

maybe fifteen members who were active in the online group Lesbians of Mclean. The other forty or so members hadn't been online in at least six months.

Was she bi? She seemed to surround herself with these men, and I already knew she'd had a playtime dynamic with a dude, though it'd been stated on Penelope's ex's profile that it was nonsexual.

On the other hand, I'd discovered for myself early on that this setup was kind of comforting. The number of messages with unsolicited dick pics and propositions was near zero. Same couldn't be said in communities with more straight men.

We'd see how long I lasted here. Lane and his friends had been very welcoming, but I'd gotten the feeling Penelope wasn't interested. She'd declined my friend request online, and the one time I'd spoken to her at an event, she'd been pretty aloof. I hadn't made any progress with the other women either, except a Little named Ivy, but she was straight.

I passed the first A-frame cabins, and Noa strode past me with a stack of what looked like packaged drapes, bed linen, and vacuum-sealed pillows.

The fifth cabin was Penelope's, and as instructed, we left the stuff close to the western wall. She wanted the rest of the space for assembling everything later.

The cabin was beautiful but completely empty. A kitchen nook near the front, by the window, a presumably tiny bathroom under the stairs that led to a loft. Everything was made of wood, so it felt like being transported to a snowcapped mountain.

Just as I turned around to head out, Penelope herself walked in with two kitchen chairs.

"Sorry, Ma'am." I hurriedly got out of the way and felt my heart beat a little faster.

I blamed her.

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She smiled politely. “It’s okay. I appreciate all the help.”

Ugh, can we just get married and live happily ever after?

My face felt hot, so I ducked out to the sound of Noa telling Penelope about everything he’d carried.

This wasn’t one of those crushes where I couldn’t put my finger on why I was so drawn to her, because I knew very well. I’d observed her at events before I’d joined their online community. She and her ex, Ella, had participated in demos and parties outside of Mclean from time to time, and I’d always envied Ella for having such an amazing Domme. Penelope was a listener just as much as she was a rebellious doer. She walked her own path, whether that gained her followers or enemies. Her opinions and views ranged from kind to cold, from compassionate and nurturing to “How’s that my problem?” and “Suck it up.” She’d spoken at one event a couple years ago—if I remembered correctly, it’d been about aftercare and safety. She’d stood up to a Dom who’d strongly recommended cuddles, ice cream, and talking extensively, which, let’s face it, many were fans of. Including me. But Penelope had been all, “Well, it’s up to the sub—and the Top. If I’m playing with a sub who’s wary of affection when she’s overwhelmed, I’m not going to suffocate her with hugs. I’m sick of truism and people deluding newbies into thinking there’s a specific route to take.”

I’d been brand-spankin’-new at the time, so that little piece of obviousness had been enough for me to nod in agreement and have a whole new world opening before my eyes. And ever since then, I’d written lists upon lists about what I wanted. What I needed. Leaving behind cookie-cutter protocols of how BDSM was “done right.”

Penelope was an individualist, which shone through in every online debate I'd witnessed too. Whether it was in kink, life, or politics, she was big on civil liberties and freedom—and parachutes, a word she'd used in another speech, this time online.

"I'm all for a robust parachute. When someone falls, we, as a community and a society, need to be there to catch them. So that's why it's extra important we don't impose rules and structures that set someone up for failure."

She had similar views when it came to safety. She didn't adhere to safe, sane, and consensual, which I knew Mclean House as a community had rejected as well. "What constitutes sane? Safe?" Once again, she'd preached about the freedoms of Tops and bottoms to choose their own way. At Mclean, they used RACK. Risk-awareness and informed consent, with a side of, "You gotta be over eighteen," in Reese's words when he'd given me a scripted speech on their rules.

"Oh, and if you drink and play, you gotta have a spotter or dungeon monitor nearby who knows what the plan is."

They had one another's backs out here in a way I'd never experienced before. Being so close-knit allowed them to take more risks, because they set up their own safety procedures to ensure someone would be catching them if they fell.

The primal brat in me really, really, really hoped Mclean House would work out for me.

I winced as I touched my shoulders.

I better not forget sunscreen tomorrow.

I slipped my tee over my head, forgoing a bra, and I was glad I'd packed the softest T-shirt I owned. Which wasn't a coincidence. Lane had packed his own version.

Mine read “On pussy patrol,” and his read “On dick duty.”

We were funny that way.

After stepping into a pair of cotton shorts, I tucked a twenty into the credit card pocket on the back of my phone, grabbed my room key, and walked out of my guest room, smelling like my lemon body wash and shea butter lotion. Not that it mattered. Within twenty minutes, everything was gonna smell of boy cologne.

Once downstairs, I let the music lead the way. The club area was fairly empty, most people ready to enjoy the sunset hour outside. But I did make a stop at the bar, where Shay and Lane were mixing drinks.

“What do you want me to put on Mistress Penelope’s tab, Nora?” Lane asked.

“Nothing, thank you.” I stepped between two barstools. “But I’ll have a Kopparberg pear cider, please.”

It was possible I’d been giddy to learn they carried that brand here, ’cause it was my absolute favorite.

“Swedes gonna Swede,” was Lane’s response.

Shay smirked and eyed my tee. “I’m guessing you and Lane ordered those together.”

“Fuck yeah, we did,” Lane said. “Ty wants me to change mine to include his name.” He was so happy about that too.

I had no such person to get possessive over me, so...

“Stop frowning and make a move on Penelope,” Lane told me.

I frowned even more. “I think she’s made her lack of interest very clear already, but for your information, I was gonna try to talk to her tomorrow.”

“When she’s a DM at the event?” Shay cocked a brow. “She’ll be obligated to talk to you.”

I huffed.

“I’ll start up a tab for you.” Lane finally gave me my cider, and I immediately chugged from the bottle.

Then we heard a voice booming from the doorway to the terrace. “Never mind, the primal shits are scheming at the bar!” It was Reese.

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I scrunched my nose.

“We’re not scheming.” Shay furrowed his brow.

Reese walked toward us. “I’m sure. Gimme four beers and three whiskeys, baby. The guitars are comin’ out.”

“Fuck yes.” Shay was suddenly in a hurry, and so was Lane.

“Do you take requests, Sir?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Reese assured.

I chuckled.

He nodded at me. “You stayin’ the night, pet?”

“Yes, Sir,” I replied.

“Good. Cam’s taking everyone’s breakfast order outside, so make sure to add yours,” he said.

Oh, good to know.

When we headed outside a moment later, I noticed a shift in the atmosphere and a change in the attendance. Jack and Franklin had gone home, while Master Greer had shown up with Archie.

It must have something to do with the event planning tomorrow. I knew some of the Tops were getting together early to discuss the next Game, which would be my third. I'd participated in the Academy event and the Easter Egg Hunt as well.

The organizers said every event was designed so that participants could be single, but I wasn't sure about this next one. It was one thing to run around the house and attend pretend-classes where pretend-professors set us up to fail—a whole other to go from station to station with a Top I didn't have.

It was going to be a TPE-oriented event, to boot. What the hell did I know about high-protocol stuff? I wasn't a consensual slave. Then again, Noa, Corey, Kit, and many others were joining, and they weren't into high-protocol either. But they did have partners.

Feeling like a third wheel, I followed Lane to the seating area just off the deck, where several had gathered in low chairs and sofas. Three guitars were present. Colt was strumming on one, and Ty had another.

I noticed Greer and Penelope talking outside her cabin farther down the lawn.

"Pizza will be here in half an hour," Tate announced.

"Where's Kit?" Shay asked.

Colt answered. "He's gettin' a taste of Luke's wrath after bratting off too much in the shower."

Tate lifted his brows at Shay. "He literally grounded Kit. He's not allowed to leave the cabin for the rest of the night."

"Damn." Shay was surprised.

I chewed on my lip and debated where to sit. Ash was still here, and he and Penelope were close. So if I sat near him, chances were I'd end up close to her as well...?

God, I was so pathetic.

I walked past the sofa occupied by Lucian, KC, and Noa—with Cam sitting on the ground between Lucian's feet.

Everyone was so fricking tan from the cruise. As if I didn't already struggle with my glow-in-the-dark complexion.

There was an empty chair between Lucian's sofa and the one I assumed Ash would share with Penelope and maybe someone else, so I sat down there with my cider.

"Excuse me, Sir?" I leaned closer toward Lucian, and he pushed pause on his conversation with KC and Archie. "May I speak with Cam?"

"Of course, dear. He's not on speech restrictions at the moment." He combed his fingers through Cam's hair.

Cam glanced up at me, curious.

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“Reese told me about a breakfast order...?” I asked rather than stated.

“Oh yeah.” Cam sat a little straighter and twisted his body to face me better. “We’re ordering from a place in Tysons—I’ll send you the link to the menu and Venmo details right now.”

“Cool, thank you.” I smiled and sat back to get comfortable, and I idly wondered if I might find a blanket somewhere. It was warm enough right now, but I had a feeling it would get chilly in an hour or so.

My phone vibrated on the armrest, so I picked it up with a pinch of relief. Everyone was coupled up or grouped off, speaking quietly among one another, and my usual social lube was sitting with Shay so they could eye-fuck their guitar-playing men.

So far, it was just strumming and tuning, but it was clear that country was the chosen genre for this bunch.

Colt’s accent fascinated me. Texas stood out from most Southern accents I’d heard in the US, and many Texans didn’t even refer to themselves as Southern. They were simply Texan.

Colt wasn’t one of those, though. Within ten minutes of my meeting him, he’d squeezed in the word Southern at least three times.

“If you ever need help, look no further than to the community’s favorite Southern Sadist.”

Kinda humble, if you asked me. He could've said the world's greatest or the country's finest.

Either way, he was very funny to listen to. He wasn't thinking about drinking; he was thankin' about drinkin'.

Much like Penelope, he had a personality that reeled people in, though in a whole other way. Penelope wasn't loud or jumping into the next spotlight. Colt was a natural storyteller and thrived in the company of others.

I'd gotten a similar impression of Ash today, but I'd heard the rumor of his heartbreak, so that explained why he wasn't joking around much. Still, he left a smile on the face of every person he talked to.

I smiled to myself and scrolled through the breakfast menu as Colt strummed his way through a story about when he was in school to become a fighter pilot. They'd snuck off base one night...

"You're an observant little thing, aren't you?"

Crap. I tilted my head to Ash, finding him smirking faintly at me.

He scooted over on the sofa till he was on the end closest to me. "We haven't been formally introduced yet. I'm Ash."

Had he caught me staring or something?

I shook his hand and plastered a smile on my face. "Nora. Nice to meet you, Sir."

"You too. So how Swedish does one have to be in order to be referred to as the Swedish girl?"

I chuckled. “Is anyone calling me that?”

He inclined his head. “I heard that before I heard your name.”

Ah. Well. “Blame Lane. The Dane.”

Or half-Danish. Whatever. It was how we’d met in our old community. I’d attended a play party, and I’d heard someone screaming out their pain in Danish. Not the most common language in the DC area.

“I see. You don’t have much of an accent, but it’s more than an ancestor thing, I reckon?”

I nodded. “Yes, Sir. I was born and raised there.”

“Huh. That’s cool.”

“You do not know Sweden.”

He laughed. “That bad?”

I shrugged and grinned. “Eh. We have our ups and downs, like any country. I still love spending the winters there.” A few weeks, at least. Christmas was a must. And snowboarding up north. In the background, Penelope was walking over with Greer, both taking their time, still engrossed in whatever they were discussing.

“But you’ve been in the US for a long time?” Ash asked.

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“I went to high school here,” I answered. “My dad was headhunted by Boeing, so we moved to Chicago first. Then Arlington after I graduated.” I cocked my head. “What about you? You born and raised in DC?”

“Nah, but not too far away. I grew up in Haverford, outside Philly. Ever heard of it?”

I shook my head, presuming he meant Haverford, not Philadelphia.

“Now, that’s an uncool place to grow up in,” he said. “It’s practically mandatory to be in a country club, and you gotta name your kid somethin’ ridiculous.”

I laughed and pulled up my legs so I could turn in my seat. “I wouldn’t call Ash ridiculous.”

He leaned in as if to whisper a secret. “It’s short for Ashford. Don’t tell anyone.”

I beamed, unable to help it. Okay, I liked this guy. He was very kind and funny. He reminded me of Reid in my old community. He was always taking care of newbies and making sure they felt included.

Sir Ashford in holey jeans and a vintage tee—that was funny. And earlier, he’d arrived in utility clothes, so that sure didn’t scream country club either.

Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I saw that Penelope and Greer were now on this side of the pool. They’d be here within seconds. My stomach felt tight with fluttery nerves, and?—

“I can be observant too, by the way,” Ash said. “You have about five seconds to decide whether I should leave room for the Holy Ghost—AKA, remain right here—or if I should scoot back to the other end of the sofa.”

Helvete. I swallowed a burst of anxiousness and anticipation, and I just barely managed to stutter out, “Stay there, please.” Because as much as I wanted Penelope mere inches away, I had a feeling she preferred distance.

I hadn’t exactly been subtle about my infatuation, and part of that was deliberate. Call it juvenile, but if the object of desire knew she was desired, her behavior would let me know how I should act next. All I’d needed to do was let said desire slip to a few people, and then word got around.

Unfortunately, things didn’t look great. If she’d been interested in me, she would’ve at least reached out to talk. Right? Chances were she wasn’t over Ella, and I couldn’t fault her for that. They’d been together forever.

My time was up. Penelope reached us, and while Greer aimed for Archie, Penelope plopped down on the other side of Ash.

“How’s the event plannin’ goin’?” Ash asked her.

Penelope blew out a breath. “We haven’t started. Greer’s just nosy and full of requests.”

Ash rumbled a chuckle. “He wants to help you bake the cake he’s gonna eat?”

Penelope tapped her nose.

“I’m surprised you signed up to be an organizer,” Ash noted. “I thought you liked that high-protocol shit.”

Did she really?

“I love the psychology behind it,” Penelope corrected. “I don’t necessarily want to live it twenty-four seven. But some scenes here and there—yeah.”

Interesting.

“What about you, Nora?” Oh, Ash was relentless. Why was he shifting the spotlight back to me? I could just sit here and go through the breakfast menu. “Are you signing up for the Game?” He turned back real quick to Penelope. “I’ve been getting to know the Swedish girl.”

“Really.” Penelope showed zero emotion on her face; she just eyed me, a little guarded.

I was so screwed. Whether she was hung up on her ex or I simply wasn’t her type—didn’t matter. This was a dead end for me.

I cleared my throat and shifted in my seat. “I’ve thought about it, but it seems more geared to couples. We’ll see how tomorrow plays out, I guess.” I’d seen a handful of the attendees for tomorrow’s mini event were lesbians. Fingers crossed I got along with one or two.

Ash knitted his brows. “What’s the event tomorrow? I’m not online much.”

“Um, they call it Try a Kink,” I said. “It’s supposedly a casual party, and it starts early.”

Penelope nodded and addressed Ash. “Nathan’s gonna demonstrate bondage, just so you know.”

“Oh.” Ash frowned. “Then guess who’s not gonna be here. This guy.” He pointed his thumb at himself. “How early is it?”

“It starts at two,” I said.

He nodded. “That explains it. I’m assuming his folks will watch our kids. But anyway—” He cleared his throat, visibly bothered by something. “If you don’t find a Domme tomorrow and still wanna join the Game, I’ll be happy to fill in. I won’t let you call me Mistress, but I promise to keep my hands to myself.”

I grinned. Relief flooded me too, and I was honestly touched by his kindness. That was so sweet of him. He definitely seemed like a fun Top, and I’d played nonsexually with men in the past.

“What about Ma’am?” I teased.

He smirked. “Fuck around and find out, girl.”

I laughed.

“That’s very kind of you—I might take you up on that, no matter what,” I said. “My only hope for tomorrow was to explore predicament bondage and ceremonial poses.”

He lifted his brows and turned to Penelope. “Hear that, Pen? Ceremonial poses. You love that nonsense.”

Re. Lent. Less.

Penelope rolled her eyes. “I heard her. You’re not being subtle, Ash.”

“Fuck subtle.” Ash rose to his feet with a grunt. “I’mma grab a beer. You girls want anything? Another cider for the Swedish girl?”

“Oh—yes, please. Lane opened a tab for me.” I held up my bottle so he could see what kind it was.

Now, what? He was just gonna leave us alone? I didn’t like that one bit. Penelope had been clear; she wasn’t interested. End of story.

“Thanks, but my tab is better,” Ash replied. He turned to Penelope next, and she requested a glass of wine.

Tate and Kingsley got up at the same time, and Tate gave us a heads-up that the pizza would be here soon.

I had a choice now. Immediately excuse myself to go to the bathroom and spare myself awkwardness, push through the moment of awkwardness and make conversation with Penelope, or check my phone.

“I’d apologize for him, but for some reason, Ash’s bull-in-a-china-shop approach has always worked with people.”

I glanced at Penelope. Maybe I didn’t have to make the choice after all.

I mustered a smile. “It’s like he doesn’t allow for anyone to feel uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, that’s him.” She sighed and smirked ruefully. “I don’t possess that gift.”

I took a swig from my cider, and my stomach fluttered as she shifted closer on the sofa.

Evidently, it didn't take more than that for the whole world to disappear. I stopped hearing the murmur of conversation going on around us; I stopped hearing the country boys on their guitars.

"May I speak bluntly?" she asked.

Fuck. Helvetes jävla skit. This was it.

"Of course." I swallowed. She was gonna ask me not to make a move or something. Or let me know she'd heard through the grapevine that I was interested, and she was letting me down gently.

It didn't feel gentle whatsoever.

"I would love to buy you a drink tomorrow at the event," she said, causing the noise of screeching tires to blare in my brain. She wanted to do what? "If you're interested in exploring a kink or getting together to see if we could play, I'm definitely game."

As wonderful as that sounded, I knew a but was coming.

"That's unfortunately it for me, though," she went on. A fancy kind of but, in other words. "I'm not in a good place in life, and you deserve someone who's not so damn jaded."

My heart sank; I couldn't help it. But it wasn't just self-pity. I felt for her. I could practically sense that she was too emotionally exhausted for games and beating around the bush. So...what, she was gonna stick to casual...? We'd all been there. It wasn't that long ago I'd broken up with my ex, and she'd been a fucking bitch toward the end. Manipulative and catty. I couldn't stand it.

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We healed eventually, though, didn't we?

So would Penelope.

"Okay," I said. "I understand." It did sting, but I refused to give up. "If you were serious about the drink, I'm in. I would love to get to know you, at least."

Small as it was, her smile looked more genuine now. "Getting to know each other sounds good."

Two pizza slices and three drinks later, we had a whole new atmosphere in the pool area. The guitars had been replaced by Shay's Bluetooth speaker, Lucian and KC had taken their boys to bed, Colt had returned to his two, and Greer had wheeled out a cart with drinks and snacks.

I could also sense the difference in the Tops' behavior when they were faced with subs who weren't Littles. It was Shay, Lane, Archie, Tate, and me left on the subbie side. Throw in Penelope, Ash, River, Reese, Greer, Kingsley, and Ty...? Things just turned more...wolfish. A layer of "fun-loving Daddy" was peeled off to reveal primal cores.

The current hot topic was whether the brats were up to something, if they'd planned a prank or whatever, which all the Tops were convinced of. Being the brilliant girl that I was—one with a task—I discreetly recorded the conversation on my phone.

"Bullshit," Reese laughed. "You were gonna reveal somethin' on the cruise, and then you changed your plans."

“I swear we didn’t!” Shay insisted. “Macklin talked about pranking Ash, but he decided to do that another time.”

“I knew it!” Ash exclaimed. “That fuckin’ brat, I swear. I’mma talk to Walker after the weekend. This can’t go unpunished.”

“This can’t go unpunished,” Lane mocked. “Sir, do you hear yourself? You’re all obsessed with this so-called prank.”

I took a sip of my cider to withhold my laughter.

This was fucking gold.

Tate and I exchanged a brief look, and we shared the same tiny smirk. I bet he was recording too.

Ash slid his stare to Ty. “What are your boundaries on outsiders putting your boy in his place?”

Ty smiled. “Clear-cut. If he dishes it out, he can take it back, but any escalation goes through me.”

Lane scowled at Ty.

Ash was pleased. “Good to know.”

Tate turned curious. “Are you two open?”

Both Ty and Lane shook their heads.

“Maybe down the line with a long list of boundaries, but we’re happy with what we

share with Macklin and Walker,” Ty elaborated. “The only play I’m lookin’ forward to one day is Lane going nuts with Shay, Macklin, and you.”

“Fuck yeah.” Reese was clearly on board, and it sounded like it was something they’d discussed before.

Tate smirked and cuddled deeper into Kingsley’s embrace. “That’ll be hot.”

“The tatted-up primal boys—no doubt,” Reese said. He nudged Ty. “Hopefully down in Florida, eh?”

“Absolutely. Back to the island.” Ty and Reese bumped their fists.

I scrunched my nose.

This was such a dick show.

Sufficiently tipsified, I leaned on the armrest and spoke for only Penelope to hear. “So I get the love you have for these guys—you’re basically family—but does it ever get to be too much?”

She’d had a few drinks too, so maybe that was why she chuckled and casually leaned toward me as well. “Both yes and no. No, because I love watching them interact. Fuck soap operas—I’d rather catch an episode of this never-ending battle of the wits. And yes, because obviously, I alienate myself when many of the private events are catered to men. But...” She trailed off and emptied her wineglass. Then she released a breath and smiled a little hollowly. “For the longest time, it wasn’t an issue because I had Ella. Now I’m supposed to start over? I don’t know how to do that.”

Okay, I drank more. I freaking guzzled that cider like my life depended on it.

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If I was going to listen to Penelope confess that she missed her ex, I needed every drop of alcohol.

“This is why I’ve decided to stay away from relationships,” she went on. “I will happily play and host demos and turn into a for-the-night Domme. It’s what I’m good for. One night. No more decade-long ordeals that end in heartbreak and self-doubt and...fuck it.” She reached for a bottle of gin on the cart and poured some straight into her empty wineglass. “Let this be a teaching moment, Nora. You’re not yourself in a relationship. You don’t know what you’re doing. I have no idea what I’m doing—even now. I just know...” She took a swig of the gin and made a face.

A breath gusted out of me, and I felt a little drunk and defeated and, honestly, defiant. Because I didn’t agree with her.

“I just know,” she repeated, “that I woke up one morning a few weeks ago, doubting every aspect of our relationship. The last few years, at least. Like, had we been happy or just...I don’t know, settled? For instance, when I look at some of my friends—take Lucas and Colt. They’ve been together for almost as long as Ella and I were, and they’re so happy. Even Tate and Kingsley, Macklin and Walker, who’ve all lived through breakups—but they reunited because they just couldn’t fall out of love with each other.”

I eyed her warily, and she looked at her friends before turning back to me.

Her hazel-green eyes burned with something so intense that it seared through the tipsy cloud.

“Ash is devastated without Nathan,” she murmured. “They broke up a little over a year ago, and he still can’t live without him. Ella and I were never like that. It’s been...” She squinted and actually counted on her fingers. “Almost four months now...? And I don’t even miss her. I don’t love her anymore.”

I swallowed hard and felt a rush of heat press itself to the surface, bleeding onto my cheeks.

She didn’t miss Ella. She didn’t love her anymore.

“And if it weren’t for her betrayal, we would’ve still been here,” she said. “Living together in okayness.” She shook her head and looked down into her glass. “We barely even fought. Growing up, I always heard—my mom, she called me her little hothead, and she said it was a good thing. ‘It’s better to love and fight wildly than live on autopilot,’ she said. And I think autopilot is exactly what I’ve been living on. Which...I’m now rambling about to a girl I just met.”

I cracked a smile and dared to give her hand a brief squeeze.

“I’m an awesome listener, so it’s okay,” I said. “Besides, I’ve been known as somewhat of a hothead myself, and I can only imagine what you’re going through. I’d probably doubt myself too—and wonder what I actually want.”

She hummed and planted her elbow on the armrest, bringing us a little closer together. “What makes you a hothead?”

I smirked. “Depends who you ask. My big brother will say it’s because I screamed like a banshee every time he was a pain in my ass when we grew up. Exes might say I’m impossible to deal with since I don’t compromise on core beliefs and kinks, and I get pretty heated about it. My dad?—”

She perked up. “But you shouldn’t compromise on core shit. Do you have an example?”

I nodded. “My first girlfriend in BDSM. I need pain in my life, and I was willing to compromise on how I receive it—like, nonsexually from another Top, with my Domme watching or something. But she was uncomfortable with that, and she not-so-discreetly hinted that people have to compromise in relationships. It’s unrealistic to expect a partner to cover every need?—”

Penelope scoffed. “That’s manipulative bullshit. It’s one thing to put a curiosity on the back burner or neglect a kink you only want once in a blue moon, but to ask a masochist to refrain from receiving pain...?”

“That’s what I yelled at her the last time we fought,” I laughed.

She grinned. “Good. Some people just piss me off—another solid reason to stick to this community.” She nodded at the others. “I can handle these yahoos.”

“Yeah, excuse me—I heard that,” Ash said.

Oops?

He came over, and he must’ve already been on his way, because he was carrying two blankets.

“From one yahoo to another,” he told Penelope pointedly, “we can handle you too.”

“What he said.” That was Greer, who came over with a bottle of tonic water. “You must’ve forgotten this earlier when you decided to check your reflection in the gin.”

“Awww,” I giggled. They were so sweet—and Penelope was properly chastised in a

playful way. She groaned through a chuckle and hid behind the blanket. I smiled as Ash wrapped the other blanket around my shoulders. “Thank you, Sir.”

“Anytime, kiddo.” He ruffled my damn hair before he returned to his seat.

Ugh. I smoothed it down again.

“To be fair, you drink gin straight and ice-cold with lemon,” Lane said frankly.

“That’s my boy.” Ty smooched him.

“Are you gonna take care of her when she’s throwin’ up in the pool?” Greer challenged.

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“Hey.” Penelope pushed down the blanket and scowled up at Greer. “Talk about something that’s never happened.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Greer replied dismissively. “Baby sisters get pushed around. Strong men like us? We obviously know better than you.”

I spluttered a laugh, and Penelope offered him an incredulous look before she glanced my way.

“You see what I’m talking about?”

I nodded, finding the whole thing hysterical.

“My life comes with a laugh track,” she added, nodding at the guys. So they were her laugh track?

Maybe it included me now too, ’cause this was too funny.

By midnight, my crush had never been so intense, probably because it’d been joined by neediness and overwhelming desire. Penelope was just so damn sexy and beautiful, and now I’d been sitting right next to her long enough that I was addicted to her presence.

I was getting a glimpse of what she’d meant when she’d told me she loved watching her friends interact. Considering how long the Founders had known one another, and how seamlessly new partners had been welcomed into the fold, it was like watching the longest-running sitcom. They joked, laughed hard, gave one another good-natured

shit, walked down memory lane, and all but finished one another's sentences.

Reese was talking about a takedown they'd hosted for newbies years ago, and Penelope and Greer added their own anecdotes to the story. How awful it'd been—which they could clearly laugh about now—because said newbies had signed up for more than they could handle. Despite lengthy negotiations and demos, once the subs were sent down to the forest in the dark, all hell had broken loose.

“The little shits wouldn't even safeword,” Greer groaned through a laugh. “They just whined and screamed.”

Reese flicked Lane and me a glance. “It was nonsexual and low on pain and everythin'—we'd told them we'd just hunt them down and bring them back to the house.”

I scrunched my nose. “Why sign up for a takedown if you don't like getting scared?”

I mean, I understood pushing one's limits and trying something new—that was part of the lifestyle—but still.

“The curse of the newbie,” River muttered into his glass.

Penelope nodded. “Too much confidence, perhaps a crush or two on someone far more experienced—you wanna prove yourself.”

Hmpf. I wanted to prove myself too, but throwing myself into a kink I couldn't handle—not even safewording to get myself out of the situation...? Nuh-uh.

“That's enough yawning for us, little one.” Greer gave Archie a kiss and grabbed his hand. “Let's go to bed.”

Oh, already? People around here went to bed so early! Ash had caught a ride with Kingsley and Tate an hour ago, after he and I had exchanged numbers, and I could tell that Lane and Ty were about to?—

“We’re off too,” Ty said, confirming my suspicion. He gathered a sleepy Lane in his arms and yanked him off the chair they’d shared. “More fuckery tomorrow.”

Lane hummed in agreement and plastered himself to his man.

I wasn’t envious at all.

Goodnights and see-you-tomorrows were exchanged, and I finished another cider.

I hoped River, Reese, and Shay wanted to stay up a while longer, because they were the only ones remaining soon enough. If they left, my evening with Penelope would be over.

Shay had just poured a new drink, thankfully, and Reese was lit and happy, back to strumming absently on his guitar.

“By the way, Pen, the Nashville crew will be here at ten tomorrow mornin’,” he said.

“Oh good. I’ll text Jack,” she replied. “He said he was available till noon.”

“Nashville crew?” Shay cocked his head.

Reese answered. “August, Anthony, and Camden.” He glanced my way. “We have two Augusts in our circle now, so we dubbed the newcomers the Nashville crew. It’s where they spend most of their time.”

“Plus, Ivy’s trying to make Auggie a thing with our original August,” Penelope

laughed.

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“That ain’t happenin,” River chuckled. “We have one August, and the new one is just King.”

“His last name,” Penelope supplied to me.

I nodded, having met Camden, the Little in their triad—and I’d talked to him online too. August King was a famous chef, and it was possible I had downloaded a couple of his cookbooks. My parents loved Southern cooking.

Camden was one of those guys who looked much younger than he was. I’d guessed not a day over eighteen when we’d met, and then I’d heard he was around thirty.

“So who’s in charge of this next Game?” Shay asked. “I want spoilers.”

“Your Daddy, me, Jack, and August—King,” Penelope clarified.

“And there’ll be no spoilers, slave,” Reese said with a smirk.

Shay scowled.

I snickered. “That’s gonna be so weird. I’ve never attended a TPE event before.”

I’d seen plenty of scenes at play parties, participated in a few too, and I’d observed TPE dynamics, but a whole event revolving around it...?

“What was the primary kink over at Old Town?” River asked me, referring to my previous community.

“Sadomasochism and D/s,” I answered. “Plenty of Bigs and Littles too.”

Reese glanced at me. “But their pain play is different, innit?”

I nodded. “Yes, Sir. There’s no room for primal play, so it’s attracted more Sadists and masochists who get off on regular beatings. Like, strap someone to a cross and so on.”

Reese nodded and looked down as he tinkered on a new song. “Max and Reid are good guys. They should join us here.”

Best idea ever. Toward the end, Lane and I had mostly stayed because of Max and Reid and a couple others.

“Lane said there’s always drama at Old Town,” Shay mentioned.

“All the fucking time,” I confirmed. “We never had a fancy online forum like you guys—Old Town has a Discord server that’s filled with shit-talk, memes, and passive-aggressive digs.”

River sat up a little straighter and gestured his drink at me. “I know how you can contribute to our fancy forum. You can post a recipe for a Swedish gravy we like—it’s unhelpfully called brown sauce.”

I spluttered a laugh. What the fuck?

“Oh yeah, the one we buy at IKEA,” Shay said. “It’s delicious.”

Reese leaned forward and eyed his brother. “The fuck’re you gonna do with a recipe, Riv?”

“Hand it to you.” River didn’t miss a beat.

Penelope and I laughed.

Undeterred, River returned his attention to me. “Have you heard of that sauce?”

“Yes, Sir,” I chuckled. “It’s a staple—and very easy to make. I can get you a recipe.”

River sat back again, pleased as punch. “Fantastic.”

Penelope shifted in her seat, facing me better, and smiled curiously. “Where in Sweden are you from? And before you answer, I should mention I’ve only heard of Stockholm and...I wanna say Lund? I went to grad school with someone from there.”

Huh. That was interesting. “Okay, so both Stockholm and Lund are part of the bottom third of the country—the populated part.” Half a joke. “I’m from there too. I grew up in three towns, first Linköping, then Uppsala, then Ronneby. You may forget the names now.”

She grinned. “Already did.”

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I caught River throwing me a pensive expression in the background.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t know a whole lot about Sweden either, but those are military towns, aren’t they?”

If he knew that about Sweden, he might know more than most Swedes did. “Um, sort of,” I answered, nodding slowly. Technically, we didn’t have military towns like the US did, but yes, he was correct in a way. “Uppsala is more known as a university town, but there’s also an Air Force flight school—which is pretty much how you can track my upbringing. We went wherever they sent my dad until he left the service. He’s an engineer.”

Was River military or something? More than that, had he been to Sweden or worked with someone from my country? Otherwise, I couldn’t see why he’d know that.

“Then you’re in good hands at Mclean,” Reese said firmly, pressing a kiss to Shay’s temple. “We love our engineers. Especially if we get to call them slaves and hunt them down.”

I lifted my brows. “I’ll make sure to tell my dad that.”

Penelope cracked up, Shay snickered, and River rumbled a laugh that made him cough around a mouthful of whiskey.

I beamed.

Reese shook his head in amusement. “Definitely a brat. I’ll have a word with Ash

before the Game.”

Um, why? “Why would you talk to him?”

“He’ll be your Top for the event, won’t he?”

I nodded.

“So I can make you suffer through him.” He smiled.

I dropped my jaw.

What. The. Fuck?

Penelope smiled too. “Welcome to Mclean House, Nora.”

The dreaded time came, when Shay was yawning and Reese wanted to take their boy to bed. River had been drifting between half sleeping and smirking lazily at the conversation flowing; he was definitely the type of man who liked to listen to what was going on around him.

I was tired too, but I’d ended up having so much fun tonight that I didn’t want the evening to be over.

“Yeah, I better get some sleep if I’m gonna be sharp at ten,” Penelope said. “I can return the drink cart if you just lift the thing up on the deck, Reese. Since you’re a big, strong man who knows better than me.”

I snickered and rose to my feet, and I folded the blankets Ash had provided for us.

Reese furrowed his brow. “I feel like I’m gettin’ punished for somethin’ Greer said.”

“I’m fine with that,” Penelope replied.

Shay and I chuckled at the toppy Tops’ staredown, which ended with Reese going, “If I throw you in the pool at some point, don’t ask why.”

River yawned and absently cracked his knuckles. “Y’all have two primal brats watchin’. Last thing we need is them throwin’ a divide-and-conquer op on our asses.”

I exchanged a quick, subtle glance with Shay. We were going to file this away, for sure. Causing playful rifts between Tops could be hysterical.

“If they end up doin’ that, it’s because you just gave them the idea,” Reese shot back. “They wouldn’t have come up with it on their own. Brats aren’t bright.”

Hey!

I wasn’t gonna take that bait, but hey!

“Good one, Daddy,” Shay drawled. “Let’s hit the sack.”

Yeah, I supposed it was time.

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I kept the blankets, not sure where they belonged, but they shouldn't be outside overnight. I could place them on the bar or ask Penelope.

Reese helped her with the drink cart, up on the deck, till she could wheel it indoors, and I followed once we'd exchanged goodnights with the guys.

The club area was pretty dark, only illuminated by the spotlights along the underside of the bartop. To be honest, the silence and the emptiness of such a large place left me with an eerie feeling. The club was supposed to be packed with kinksters and flashing with purple lights, music pumping, kink furniture occupied... I'd overheard Reese earlier saying only three people were spending the night in the main house, which was uncommon for a Friday.

Tomorrow would be different. They'd host an event, and those attracted a larger crowd.

I hadn't decided yet if I was staying the night tomorrow as well. The play party wrapped up at six, at which point I could probably catch a ride with Ty and Lane. I knew they were heading home after the event.

"Do you have everything you need up in your room, Nora? I don't know about you, but when I've had more drinks than I can count on one hand, I need painkillers and water on my nightstand."

I smiled and left the blankets on the bartop. "I'm okay. Four ciders aren't enough to make me hungover."

She sighed and opened the fridge. “Ah, to be young...”

Like she was old? Pffft. She hadn’t even turned forty yet.

“Humor me, please.” She extended a bottle of water across the bartop. “You didn’t eat much for dinner either.”

My subbie senses tingled and fired off multicolored flares, and the girl with a massive crush—AKA, me—wondered if Penelope was like this with all the subs around here. She probably was, right? I mean, she was a Founder, and I’d heard so many things about how protective and caregiving they were out here.

I accepted the bottle and unscrewed the cap, and...I cursed myself because I was going to be too honest. I felt the urge to be blatant bubble up within me, and I could stop myself, at the same time as I couldn’t. Don’t say it, don’t say it. I’m gonna say it. Fuck my life.

“Thank you. I’m gonna pretend you only do this with special subs.”

She laughed softly and rested her arms on the counter. “That’s cute. I guess my warning earlier hasn’t deterred you from flirting.”

What warning? That she only wanted casual arrangements?

Um, no.

“A girl can dream.” I took a swig of the water before mirroring her move on my side of the bar, resting my arms on the counter. “But if it makes you uncomfortable, I’ll stop. I’m just...” I raked my teeth over my bottom lip, trying to come up with the best way to say this. “I know you’ve been through a lot, so if my flirting just makes you smile or improves your day, then it’s not for nothing.”

She smiled slightly, and her hazel gaze felt a few degrees warmer. “That’s very honest.”

“Not to mention straightforward, another reason I had to get out of Sweden,” I joked.

She grinned and rested her chin in her hand. “Are you saying Swedes aren’t honest?”

Well...

“No, I’d say we are, but we’re also a reserved bunch,” I said. “When we get angry, we write a strongly worded note to our neighbors and leave it anonymously in the elevator. Or we take to Facebook to rant. Meanwhile—” I gigglesnorted. So attractive. “Before we moved to the US, we lived on a quiet street—small houses, even smaller backyards—and this one neighbor would go out and mow his lawn in the middle of the night when he’d been fighting with his wife. I was like twelve, maybe thirteen, and I opened my window on the second floor and just laid into him. Like, ‘Are you serious right now? It’s two in the fucking morning, and I have school tomorrow! Stop bitching at your wife, or find a quieter hobby!’” I beamed as Penelope laughed. She had the most gorgeous laugh. Warm and light, almost musical. “This douchebag was the one who’d messed up, but it was my mom who apologized. She was so embarrassed by my outburst.”

Penelope shook her head in amusement, down to chuckles. “Hotheaded and salty. I like it.”

I liked seeing her in high spirits. She’d been carefree the whole evening. Well, once she’d relaxed around me.

She offered a softer smile and briefly covered my hand with hers. “It is flattering, by the way. The flirting. I can’t imagine what you’d dream about with me—to use your words—but I’ve enjoyed myself tonight. More than I thought I would.”

Welp. That was quite honest of her too—and boy, did it make me feel good! I couldn't hide my grin.

“Ma’am, you don’t have to imagine. I can tell you if you want,” I replied.

I was sure I came off as a puppy who’d just caught a whiff of a treat, but I didn’t care. The amusement hadn’t left her eyes, and that was a good sign.

Her smile hadn’t faded either. “Okay.” She nodded once, as if to herself, and straightened a little. “What exactly is it you dream about?”

A chance with you.

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The words were right there on the tip of my tongue, along with hopes of dates, tons of kink, love, and sailing off into the sunset together. But given her history—and honestly, how many people past their thirties had life experience that shot down romantic optimism?—I held back those words.

I didn't wanna overwhelm her. At the same time, I wanted her to know my wishes weren't founded in spur-of-the-moment thoughts or a days-old infatuation.

"I guess I should start by saying there are a handful of Dommies I've followed online and at events as a newbie," I admitted. "I've stumbled across your posts and online journaling, and then I've attended demos you've hosted around the city. And you and Ella went to a few parties around Logan Circle."

She inclined her head. "I have friends in a more lesbian-oriented community there."

That made sense.

"Right, so you're one of those Dommies—admittedly the one I've followed the most," I said. "And, you know..." Satan också. All of a sudden, the courage drained out of me, and I felt exposed in a moment where I had zero confidence about the future. My mouth went dry, and I rubbed the back of my neck. "In the end, I guess I want to turn a for the night into a second and a third and a fourth, but yeah. Yeah."

Thank fuck, she took pity on my fumbling, and she gathered one of my hands in both of hers. Then she surprised me by kissing my knuckles, causing me to stand ramrod straight and suck in a breath.

Good development or bad? Was she gonna let me down easy again or?—

“Just a few hours ago, I would’ve... Well, I said what I said to you.” She lowered my hand to the counter again but kept it in her grasp. “I’m not going to say it again, partly because I can’t do it as confidently. Just...please don’t get your hopes up with me, pet. It has absolutely nothing to do with you—in fact, you’re kind of testing my resolve...”

She called me pet.

I’m testing her resolve.

I wasn’t gonna push. I just couldn’t back away either. I stood there, verbally frozen—if that was a thing—but I inched forward a little. I couldn’t help it. It was the strangest sensation to be warned and complimented at the same time. I couldn’t speak, and yet I leaned forward as if she beckoned me. Until our stances were mirrored once more and mere inches separated us. Goddamn the bartop—it was in the way.

Did she have to be so damn beautiful? She radiated warmth and softness, all while her edge never disappeared out of sight.

“You should get some sleep.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

But neither of us moved, and a beat later, I felt the heat crackling. It was ignited by a single flash of desire in her eyes, which sent a blaze of fire through me. Fuck me, but she was something else. What would it be like to follow her? To be owned by her? To serve her, to kiss every freckle, to...

She broke the spell with a sigh, but rather than averting her gaze and putting distance between us, she leaned forward and gently knocked her forehead to mine. Like a silent, “What am I gonna do with you?”

I swallowed dryly. Maybe the spell wasn’t broken after all, ’cause I felt feverish. Need imploded within me, and I clenched my thighs together.

She closed her eyes, and she swallowed too. In the deafening silence of the empty club, it was so easy to hear the slightest sound. And then, maybe I chipped away at her resolve some more, because she closed the last distance and pressed her lips to mine, followed by her fingers shaping themselves to my jaw.

So this is how I die.

All my thoughts sank into a pool of hot water, where they became background noise to the most epic win I’d had in a long time. Mistress Penelope was kissing me. Holy fuck, she was kissing me. I kissed her back tentatively, brushing my lips against hers as she did with mine. Just for a few seconds, before she deepened the kiss. Her soft lips, her soft tongue, the taste of gin and lemon, and her manicured nails gently pressing into my jaw nearly short-circuited my brain.

I shivered violently and completely surrendered. As if I’d ever put up a fight...

She took her time and wouldn’t let me get ahead of myself. Whenever I tried to kiss her a little harder or deeper, she tightened her grip on my jaw or nipped at my bottom lip.

“Easy, girl,” she whispered.

But I’m needy-wanty!

“Sorry,” I whispered back instead.

That made her smile, and she gave me a hungry kiss that I felt fucking everywhere. I had to cross my damn legs to get some friction, and goose bumps appeared across my arms.

With a sensual twist of her tongue around mine, she had me in the palm of her hand.

My hands—I didn’t know what the fuck to do with my hands, but then it didn’t matter, because she broke away and told me to stay put. I blinked, in a daze, and watched as she rounded the bar. Yes, yes, yes, yes. She came over to me, the determination and lust so clear in her eyes, and she got her hands on me again. She pressed me up against the bar, cupped my face in her hands, and kissed me hard and deep.

I drew a shaky breath and threw my arms around her neck, to which she let hers drop to my hips.

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I pressed myself against her, needing everything she could give, and she finally let me be greedy.

We made out hungrily, as if our lives depended on it, and it felt like she threw caution to the wind. At least for the moment. Her hands roamed my body, slowly, firmly, greedily, over my hips, up my ribs, cupping the undersides of my tits...

I whimpered and flushed.

“More,” I pleaded.

Holy fuck, she didn’t deny me. I’d been so sure she’d slow things down. Instead, she cranked it up, pinching my nipple and letting one of her hands drop low. She cupped my pussy through my shorts, and I could barely believe it.

I gasped and rolled my hips into her hand, and she cursed under her breath.

“I can feel how warm you are...”

You should feel how wet I am...

I swallowed dryly and latched on to her, already forbidding her from leaving my side. I couldn’t speak, but I could let my body do the talking for everything I craved.

Please, please, please.

Another needy whimper slipped out, and I kissed her harder. Deep and passionate,

already addicted, so fucking hooked, and spinning out of control.

Maybe she was too. Because the second she slipped her hand down my shorts, there could be no going back. We both shivered, and she eased her middle finger between my lips. I moaned and buried my face against her neck. Heat exploded within me, and?—

“So soft and smooth,” she whispered. “Fucking perfect.”

“Please don’t stop,” I managed to get out.

She didn’t. She pushed two fingers inside me and pressed her thumb down on my clit, and my fucking knees almost caved. Oh my God, this was going to be over embarrassingly quickly.

“This was what you wanted?”

I nodded quickly and tightened my hold on her. “To start with. Holy fuck.”

She chuckled softly and kissed my neck, and she drew the most enticing circles around my clit.

I was fucking soaked, and I felt like my pussy had its own pulse and heartbeat, just pumping blood and deep desire.

“I want to make you feel good too,” I begged.

“I already do.” She fingered me harder, adding a third digit, and that was the sweet spot.

“But—”

“I know what you mean,” she whispered. Then she caught me in a kiss, and I could only go along with the ride. I had lost the ability to move properly. “Another time, maybe. All I want right now is to see you get off.”

Christ, she was about to. I could already feel the heat surging throughout my body. My heart was officially hammering in my chest, and I couldn’t stop pushing to meet her every movement.

I was swimming in pleasure, and I cried out, both in frustration and euphoria, when the orgasm began crashing down on me. I wasn’t ready, I wasn’t ready, I wasn’t ready! I didn’t want the moment to be over, but fuck, it felt so good. I lost my breath, and the bliss consumed me in fiery waves.

I heard her whispers, almost as if she was standing far away or we were underwater.

Goddamn beautiful.

That’s it...lose it all to me.

So wet and tight.

The aftershocks rocked through me, and I slumped back against a barstool. Penelope followed instantly, righting my shorts and kissing my jaw.

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“I don’t know who needed that more, you or me,” she murmured.

In my eyes, I hadn’t given her anything, so I wasn’t sure what she was referring to.

“My brain is mush...” I mustered a sleepy grin, one she mirrored.

Then she kissed me softly and rubbed her nose to mine. “I’ll walk you upstairs. Tomorrow we’ll spend more time together...?”

Hell yes. I nodded.

I wanted to spend the night with her too, but I could be patient.

Somewhat.

CHAPTER THREE

Penelope Darling

Good Christ, already?

It had to be too early for a bunch of brats to jump in the pool.

I cursed and folded the pillow over my head to drown out the noise. We’d clearly prioritized wrong when we’d built the cabins. We’d thought more about shelter from extreme weather and less about screams.

Kit and Noa were definitely here.

“Faster! Faster! You gotta win, Daddy!”

“Woot! Go again!”

I gnashed my teeth, kicked off the covers, and shoved away the pillow. Then I grabbed my phone and squinted at the screen.

Nine thirty-four.

Fuck my life. Did these brats not know the meaning of sleeping in?

At the sound of laughter and goading from KC and Colt, I added them to my shit list too. Unfortunately, I couldn't count on Lucian in these matters because he was an early riser, but River? Where was he? How could he sleep through all this?

As if the ruckus wasn't enough, someone put on music, and then we had Lady Gaga blaring out about a bad romance.

I give up.

I cursed and scrambled out of bed, only to come face-to-face with the mess of my cabin. Furniture in its boxes everywhere, bed frame leaning against the wall—I had a lot to assemble next week.

After gathering my hair in a haphazard bun at the top of my head, I stepped into a clean pair of panties, and I dug a snug tee out from a duffel. One of the things still boxed up was my new coffeemaker, so I had to go up to the main house for a caffeine fix.

On second thought, I took off my panties again and went with my bikini bottoms. Might as well. After the event planning, I was going to need a sunny nap before the party.

I made quick work of freshening up in my tiny bathroom under the stairs, and then I slipped into my flip-flops and walked out of the cabin. I was met by harsh sunlight and way too many brats. And my cabin was closer to the woods than the pool. River, Reese, and Shay's cabin was right across from the pool, so it seemed even less likely that River was asleep.

Dean, Santiago, and Gael have arrived, I see.

"Every single time!" I heard Noa guffaw. Cameron was leaving their cabin, and Noa ran toward him. "You gotta see this, babe! Mister Colt and Mister Ty finish at the same second every race! And Daddy won!"

"Hrmph." I took in the surroundings, spying KC, Ty, Colt, Santiago, Gael, and Kit in the pool. Reese must've finished his morning swim; he was eating breakfast in the shade. Lucian and Dean were reading the paper on the deck, and... August King and his two partners had arrived too. Anthony and Camden were getting ready to jump in the water.

What on earth?

Nora.

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Still too damn beautiful for my comfort.

I held a hand over my eyes to shield them from the sun. Lane, Shay, and Nora were busy at a table that was packed with something. At first, I thought it was regular rollaboard luggage, but the cases were open to reveal plastic organizers with countless little compartments. Had someone bought an entire crafts supply store?

As one pop song morphed into another, I started trailing up the lawn and zeroed in on the breakfast setup on the deck. And not on Nora. Not on Nora at all.

Goddamn her.

Last night, my resolve had shattered faster than KC's eardrums when Noa got excited.

The worst part was, I shouldn't be leading the girl on if I couldn't offer what she wanted.

Her damn smile, though. I couldn't see exactly what she, Lane, and Shay were doing over there, but whatever it was, they wore matching smiles that spoke of a good morning. They chatted in between moments of sheer concentration. The closer I got, the more I could see, and were those beads? They were putting something on what looked like thread or wire, at least.

"Morning, Mistress Penelope!" Kit yelled from the pool.

"Good morning, Ma'am!" Noa waved happily. "Kit and I set your breakfast order on

the upper corner of the table so no one would steal it, 'cause we're always good boys!"

Crap. Those little shits always made me crack a smile.

"That's sweet of you, boys," I answered.

Lucian lowered his paper and nodded hello. Like Greer, Lucian had requests about the TPE event. I was sure Dean did too. Eager bastards.

Reese crammed half a croissant into his mouth and jerked his chin for me to come over to his lounge.

"How do you maintain those abs with freaking croissants?" I had to ask. Because if I looked at white bread, I gained three pounds.

He brushed some croissant flakes off his chest. "Hon, you maintain your brain with croissants. The abs get broccoli."

I snorted softly and sat down on the edge of his lounge.

He nodded toward the deck. "You missed the funniest thing earlier. So King and Anthony showed up with their Little, right? And Camden brought a whole fuckin' Michaels with him." As he spoke, I glanced across the pool to where Lane, Shay, and Nora were busy. "First half hour, it was Noa, Kit, Gael, and Camden messin' around to make Easter presents for their Owners. And those three—Shay, Lane, and Nora...? They were all, uh, craftin's for kids and Littles. But look at 'em now."

I grinned. That was precious. The Littles were nowhere to be seen around the crafts table.

I glanced back at Reese. “You and River were cute before, but you’ve leveled up since Shay claimed your asses.”

“I know, right?” He leaned back and folded an arm behind his head. “I’m so fucking cute I don’t know what to do with myself sometimes.”

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. Reese was full of charming lines that I was going to send directly to a certain account on our forum. It’d opened up the other day, and I had a feeling it was going to be the next big buzz in terms of who was behind it.

“You got a little cute yourself last night,” Reese noted. “Hard to resist the new girl, huh? Been a while since I saw you flirt.”

Fuck. “Don’t get me started.” I rose to my feet again, needing that coffee. ASAP.

Besides, flirt was a strong word. I’d just...soaked up Nora’s attention like some deprived bitch, and then I’d thrown myself at her.

I looked over at her, and Lane and Shay glanced our way at the same time.

“Are you talking about us?” Shay hollered.

“Never you fuckin’ mind!” Reese hollered back.

“They’re talking about us,” Lane concluded.

Shay furrowed his brow. “For the record, everyone can do this.” He held up whatever he was working on.

“Yeah,” Lane agreed. “We’re primal and badass?—”

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“Scary,” Shay added.

“Downright twisted,” Nora supplied. “But also, we make cute things.”

“Cute in a terrifying way,” Lane finished.

Reese and I weren’t the only ones who cracked up at that. Oh, those sweet little brats. Colt and KC were quick to push their buttons, and Lucian assured the scary, twisted, badass primals that he was already petrified by their mere presence.

Camden seemed inspired. “Daddy, I wanna do crafts again!”

“You’ve been in the water two minutes,” Anthony chuckled.

I was looking forward to getting to know them better. Starting with August—he was helping us plan the next Game in a few minutes. So I rounded the pool and grabbed my bagel order, and Cam hurriedly joined me to pour me a cup of coffee from the thermos.

“Thank you, sugar. How are you today?” I accepted the cup.

“Great, thank you, Ma’am. Master told me to make sure you were well tended to, so please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

Oh Christ. I offered Cam a smile and squeezed his hand briefly, then sought out Lucian, only to find him watching us already.

“Will you stop fussing?” I asked. “I’m fine.”

“When I’m damn good and ready, my dear.” He flipped the pages of his paper and then brought his own mug to his lips. “By the way, someone will be here on Monday to assemble your furniture for you.”

For the love of?—!

He behaved as if I was dying! So I’d gone through a breakup—four fucking months ago—and...sure, maybe I was struggling to find myself, but he was taking this too far.

I knew Lucian wouldn’t be reasoned with, though. He was still recovering from years of stress and burning himself out, so now he’d gotten the weird idea that if he had to rest, so did everybody else. Except his slave, I supposed. Although, that wasn’t entirely fair. Cam had been vocal about Lucian’s unwillingness to crank up their TPE structure. They were getting there, slowly, but Lucian was still in fussing mode.

I suppressed a sigh and turned back to Cam.

“I propose a compromise,” I told him. “I’ll let you wait on me so Lucian can calm his tits, and I’ll come by your house next week with baked goods and my famous chili. Even Colt approves of it.”

The boy lit up. “Deal. Thank you very much, Ma’am?—”

“I heard my name!” Colt called out.

Cam and I exchanged a smirk before I found Colt in the pool.

“Just bribing Cam here with my famous chili,” I told him.

That had his interest, and he swam over to the edge. “Oh yeah? Can you bribe me with it too? My future husband keeps puttin’ beans in his, so we might not make it.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Where is he anyway?”

“I have beans!” Noa yelled, grabbing his crotch. “Magic beans!”

One more headshake. This one from Colt too.

“Get your beans over here, boy,” KC ordered. “You can help me finish my workout.”

Colt and I looked at each other again, and he said, “Luke’s writin’ his vows in the cabin.”

Aw, that made me smile. “Have you finished yours?”

His forehead wrinkled. “I’m gonna wing it.”

O...kay.

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Well, I was sure they were going to be lovely either way. Colt had never struggled to find his words, that was for certain.

When he returned to challenge Ty in another race, I brought my breakfast over to the crafty brats, and I sat down next to Nora.

As much as I should probably maintain a safe distance, it seemed foolish after last night. If I avoided her, she might get hurt, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Not that I could claim I sat down here only for her sake...

“Morning, scary brats.” I took a sip of my coffee and looked at what they were doing. Shay and Lane appeared to be making elastic bracelets with letter beads, and then I saw Camden at the head of the table doing the same thing. Nora too, only she was crafting a key ring with similar beads.

“Morning, Ma’am.”

“Good morning, Mistress Penelope,” Shay said, holding out the bracelet he was working on. “Is this gonna get me laid or what?”

I grinned and leaned forward, reading what the beads said. Shay’s Daddy.

“That’s sweet. Reese will gobble that up,” I said.

He smirked, satisfied. “I made one for River earlier too.”

“Look at mine, Ma’am!” Camden stood up, almost as short as Noa, and proudly showed me his bracelet with pastel-colored beads. “I borrowed the idea from Lane. D for Daddy, C for Camden, D for Daddy.”

“Aw, I bet they’ll love it,” I said in my best Mommy voice. Which never felt natural, but I’d seen firsthand how the wrong tone of voice could deflate an excited Little.

Lane was more modest when he flashed the piece he was working on.

“SKD and WFB?” I tilted my head, confused.

Lane shrugged, his smile a bit sheepish. “Swamp King Daddy and Wild Fry Boy. He usually calls me darlin’, but his latest nickname for me is wild fry, so...yeah.”

Check out these sweeter-than-sugar terrors. Who wouldn’t be terrified to face them in a dark alley?

Even though I was nowhere near being interested in Mommykink—or Daddykink, for that matter—I loved seeing Littles and Middles find their comfort zone out here.

“I foresee a lot of dopey Daddy smiles on your Owners’ faces later,” I predicted, turning to Nora next. “What about you, pet?”

I saw a faint blush creep forward on her cheeks, reminding me how deliciously flushed she’d been last night...

She shifted in her seat and slid a couple pieces closer to me. She’d used plain white beads with black letters, and the bracelet packed a punch with its simple word.

Servitude.

The key ring read “Prey.”

Motherfucker. Who knew plastic beads could kick you in the teeth?

I didn’t need this in my life. I didn’t need to be exposed to things—to traits, to appearances, to kinks, to...to whatever the fuck—that made me wonder if...maybe... Maybe there was someone out there for me. Maybe there was someone closer than that.

Nora ticked too many boxes, and it rattled me.

I’d let things go too far last night, but even in knowing that, it wasn’t going to stop me later today. I was already looking forward to buying her that drink after the party. I wanted to watch her today, see how she interacted with my friends and our community Tops who were going to assist in the kinky exploring.

I found a decent distraction when Jack arrived. With him here, the event planning could begin, and we opted to sit on the little porch outside Greer’s cabin. It gave us some distance from nosy Masters who had just one more idea.

Unlike me, Greer had a slave who’d set up a nice seating area on their porch, so we took our seats around a low table that definitely got wiped down frequently—even the cushions looked like they were new. Reese had brought over a umbrella for us, seeing as this was gonna take a while, and I’d come prepared with notebooks, pens, the community planner, and?—

“Excuse me, Sirs and Ma’am? I have drinks for you!”

I looked over my shoulder and spotted Cam hurrying down the lawn with a cooler.

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I narrowed my eyes. Lucian was watching way back on the deck.

“Ain’t that sweet.” Reese smiled.

“Yeah, there’s more to it,” I said. “Do you happen to have a message from your Owner as well?”

Cam’s sheepish grin confirmed my suspicion.

I could swear, Masters were sometimes a bigger pain in the ass than a brat on a mission to raise hell.

“One final request from Master Lucian.” Cam set down the cooler next to Reese. “It’s actually from Master Greer too. They’ve been texting all morning.”

“I’m shocked,” Reese deadpanned.

Jack and August chuckled.

“Right, so, um...” Cam clasped his hands behind his back. “They really want the event to be next weekend as opposed to the weekend after. Master Greer and his family will struggle to find babysitters if you go with the second option, and we have plans to celebrate Daddy for a case he and his team won recently.”

Ah—well. I exchanged a glance with Reese. We’d had two dates floating around online to figure out what members preferred, and next weekend was a winner for the majority.

“That won’t be a problem,” Reese told the boy. “Was there anythin’ else?”

Cam shifted where he stood, and he cleared his throat. “Yes, Sir. Master wanted to point out that you don’t have a single high-protocol Top on your planning committee.”

Lucian, I swear.

Next, Cam gestured vaguely at the cooler. “The drinks are a gift from Master so you can apply something cold to that burn. Please don’t shoot the messenger.”

Jack cracked up, and August and Reese chuckled; although, Reese’s chuckle was on the darker side.

I was busy trying to improve my eyesight so I could spy Lucian’s expression from down here. Fucking bastard.

Reese flipped open the lid on the cooler, grabbed a soda wet with condensation, and handed it back to Cam. “Here’s one for your obstinate Owner, then. He could’ve planned the event with us if he hadn’t acted like a fuckin’ child for twenty years by workin’ past his bedtime.”

I smirked, loving Reese a whole lot at the moment. “Might I add that all the high-protocol Tops want to compete in the event. Is Lucian suggesting we take on a cheater who’ll know what’s going to happen before they enter the challenge?”

Cam snickered under his breath and accepted the soda. “I’ll deliver your comebacks, Sir and Ma’am. Thank you for your time!” He was quick to leave the porch and hightail it out of here.

I shook my head in amusement.

“Not a single high-protocol Top...” Reese muttered to himself with his own headshake. “All right, let’s get some work done. Between the four of us, I think we can put Lucian in his place.”

It was a solid goal. And despite what Lucian claimed when he was a whiny prick, we had a great variety of experience right here. August had been a Daddy Dom for roughly twenty years, Jack was a master at humiliation, degradation, and mind games, I’d been a Domme and public kink speaker for over a decade, and Reese had lived and breathed BDSM since he and River had been in their early twenties.

“We have a good age range too,” August noted. “I’d like to think that matters as well. Our preferences change over time, same how we tackle events and challenges, not to mention overzealous community members.”

He made a good point.

“Agreed,” Reese replied. “It’ll be our experience and wisdom, paired with Jack’s and Pen’s younger energy.”

What the fresh fuck.

I stared at him. “Dude, you’re like two years older than me.”

“Two years wiser,” he corrected.

Yeah, I wasn’t taking the bait.

“Anyway...” Jack smirked. “I’d like to plan this event before I turn thirty-three.”

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I made a whipping sound in Reese's direction, to which he scowled.

But Jack was right. We needed to get this done. In order to host the Game next weekend, all the information had to go online by tomorrow.

"All right." I opened a notebook and got ready to jot things down. "As fun as it would be to completely ignore requests from Greer and Lucian, they've had some good ideas since we decided the theme. The first one being—we'll do an event with stations."

Reese inclined his head and handed out drinks from the cooler. "Greer suggested a bake-off of some sort."

I remembered that, and I glanced at August. "Can we trust the chef with that?"

"A fine idea, indeed. I'm in." He nodded. "I take it the four of us will be judges?"

"I reckon three's fine," Reese said. "Y'all can judge, and I'll run the commentary and whatever else might need attention at the same time."

I wrote that down. "On that note, we have some volunteers already. Sloan, Lucas, and Santiago signed up to be monitors."

"You can add Franklin to the list," Jack supplied.

Excellent. We'd only need one or two more, depending on how many stations we ended up with. And participants. Judging by the talk online, it was going to be a

popular event.

“Considering it’s TPE we’re dealing with, I wanna propose fewer stations that might require more time, rather than several that get brats buzzing,” I added. “That on its own will be a test for the energizer bunnies who can’t spell patience.”

“Should we cater to the brats and Littles at all?” Reese wondered. “Even though they might get excited by the challenge of it all, I can picture Kit and Noa subdued as fuck by kneeling, competing in grace, and actin’ like human furniture.”

“Certainly Camden too,” August chuckled. “I suppose it’s a question of whether we cater to everyone or just focus on one kink. Your previous Games didn’t include multiple kinks in the same way, did they? I read about your Hunt and the Cage event, for instance.”

That was true. All Games weren’t for everyone. Everyone was free to join, but we chose different themes. We’d focused heavily on sadomasochism, primal play, and brats so far.

“Fair enough,” Reese conceded. “I do have one idea I wanna run with, but I can announce it after the event.”

“Care to share?” I asked.

He smiled faintly. “A mascot challenge. Let the members compete to illustrate a mascot for us, and maybe it’ll put out the fire of our Mclean House versus House Mclean bullshit debate.”

I laughed. I loved the idea, but I wasn’t sure shifting that focus was going to work long-term.

“I bet the Littles will love that,” August said.

I nodded and made a note. “I’m adding it to your list,” I told Reese. “For the event itself, I think we should focus solely on TPE. As mentioned, we didn’t consider consensual slaves or non-masos for the boot camp or the takedown, and so on. This will be the slaves’ moment in the sun.”

We were in agreement. And we were thirsty in this damn heat. While August grabbed one of the other notebooks, I guzzled my iced tea, and Jack popped open a ginger ale.

“Since there are four of us, four stations would give us the opportunity to have a host at each one,” Jack mentioned. “It’ll make it easier for us to judge the other challenges too. I’m assuming there will be judging anyway.”

Definitely. I nodded and made more notes. “Off the top of my head...I say we judge on performance, grace, obedience, and...” I pursed my lips, thinking.

“How they please their Owner,” Reese said quietly. Then he sat forward a bit. “One station could be called Serve Your Owner or somethin’, and the subs will have to put together a tray with—fuck, I don’t know—a hot beverage, a snack, shit like that. In which case, they gotta show they know their Owner and their preferences.”

I liked that a lot. Plus, it would pose a great challenge for Tops and bottoms who attended as friends, new to each other, or outside any regular dynamic. We often had plenty of those. Ash and Nora, for example.

Jack’s eyes lit up with interest. “If we let that challenge end with the subs acting like a footstool or another type of human furniture, I’d like to be in charge of that station.”

Reese snapped his fingers. “That’s it. Yeah. Perfect. And obviously, I wanna run a station that includes pain.”

“Suffer For Your Owner?” August suggested.

Oh, this was great. The creativity ball was rolling now. I made a quick note that we had to discuss our budget later, and we needed to meet up again, at least twice before the Game.

We declared ourselves done for the day shortly before noon, when Jack had to leave. He and Franklin were taking their daughter to an early movie, and August and his two took the opportunity to go buy furniture for their condo in Alexandria. They’d been so busy with work, he said, they hadn’t had the time to move in yet.

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Reese declared he wanted a nap, which sent Shay hurrying his way, and I heard something about River getting back soon. From where, I had no idea. I kinda wanted a nap too, but when I spotted Nora catching some sun by the pool, that notion flew out the window. The girl was topless, just chilling and chatting with Lane, and I didn't need that image in my head when I went to bed. Last night was bad enough. My God, was it bad. I could still hear her in my memories, how she'd sounded when she'd whimpered, how she'd felt when she'd shaken and quivered...

Nope, I was going to assemble some fucking furniture until the party started in two hours.

Damn her and her perky tits.

When I reemerged a little before two o'clock, the property had a new atmosphere. More people had shown up, some had left, the pool was crowded, and River stepped out of their cabin, cranky as fuck because he wasn't getting his hike.

"Reese signed up to be a DM, the dumbass," he grumbled.

I adjusted my bra strap underneath my top as I headed for the deck. "You poor thing. Can't believe you have a brother who's so active in the community."

He lifted his brows and took a drag from his smoke. "I know you're mockin' me, but I deserve sympathy for that shit."

I laughed.

Before I headed inside, I tried to see if Nora was around, but I couldn't spot her. It was both a blessing and a curse. I may not have gotten my nap, but I'd still indulged in too many daydreams while I'd wrestled my bedframe upstairs to my little loft. Then I'd been swept away in what-ifs as I'd gotten my kitchen nook ready. New mugs, new plates, new coffeemaker...

What if she's great for me, and I let her slip through my fingers because I'm a jaded bitch?

What if I sign myself up for misery because I won't even give her a chance?

Logically speaking, I knew I wasn't thinking rationally. A few of my friends had pointed that out too. Avoiding commitment for the rest of my life...? Christ.

I sighed to myself and entered the nightclub area, that was thankfully well air-conditioned, where approximately thirty of our members had gathered. Several faces completely new to me. Some only visited once a month. Some not even that. Some were insanely active in our online community but had never set foot in this house.

The members in charge of this little party had prepared everything already. The stage was set up for those who wanted to try ceremonial poses, with Beau and Ivy helping out. Nathan had claimed a corner with a sawhorse and a wall that had hooks for restraints, and he had Gretchen assisting.

Down by the seating area, another three Tops and their assistants had prepared for members to try out clamps, needle play, and wax play. It explained Santiago's interest in being here. He was an excellent wax player.

I bet he wanted to keep an eye on Nora too. I'd learned they were friends.

I found Reese, Dean, Colt, and a couple from the bondage community at the bar, busy

attaching the DM patches. I'd helped Sierra's Domme when they were new out here, before they'd found their home upstairs in the rope dojo. I barely saw them at events these days, and Nattie wasn't here today. Just Sierra and a man I hadn't met before.

"Hi, Mistress Penelope." Sierra waved.

"Hey, sweetie. Where's Nattie?" I accepted a patch from Colt and attached it to my top. Our regular gear followed. A folding knife, shears, and first aid, all neatly packed into a pouch that I attached with a clip at my hip.

"She's at home, trying to get our last three kittens adopted," she replied with a grin. It jogged a memory; I'd seen a post about their cat having kittens several weeks ago. "You don't want a kitten, by any chance?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Afraid not. My life's too much of a mess. I—" But Ash! Ash was just like me; we loved both cats and dogs. Unlike me, he had a home and had actually been talking about adopting a cat. "You know what, can you ask Nattie to set one aside? I have a friend's birthday coming up. He's amazing with animals."

I was willing to break the cardinal rule of never giving a pet as a present, only because I knew Ash. He'd be thrilled.

Before Sierra could respond, someone took the stage and asked for everyone's attention. That someone was Nathan, and it didn't take a genius to see he was tired. Beyond the "I didn't sleep well last night" kind of tired.

"Nice to see so many of you here," he said into the microphone. "Before Beau takes over, I just wanna say that—given the turnout—please respect the lines, don't interrupt an ongoing scene, and if you have any questions, ask one of the DMs, not the members who are hosting the stations, unless it's your turn. Thank you." He

handed the mic over to Beau and stepped down.

Hmm. Nathan had never been what I'd call overly social, but he was still incredibly kind and always took his time to help out. Now, though, it felt like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

He must know Ash was back in the community, right? They still saw each other every week when they drove their kids from one house to the other.

They reminded me a lot of Colt and Lucas, in how one was very outgoing and boisterous, and the other was happy to be dragged along. However, having observed Nathan here and there, I got the feeling he wasn't as lenient as Lucas could be with Colt. Lucas had patience for days. Nathan's assertiveness was quiet but, nevertheless, always present.

As Beau presented the event and brought up the rules and whatnot, I had Colt on one side and Sierra on the other.

"Who the fuck wears leather pants in this heat?" Colt asked quietly.

I scrunched my nose and peered up at him. He just cocked a brow at me.

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“Not me.” I grabbed the waistband and showed the stretchy stretch. “They’re leggings.” They were a fucking godsend. They looked like painted-on leather pants, but no, sir.

He furrowed his brow. “Fake pants,” he whispered. “How come they don’t make those for men? I’m sweatin’ my balls off.”

I patted his arm. “Maybe it’s menopause.”

He could also give up the jeans for shorts, but whatever. Besides, it wasn’t that hot in here. The AC was running on high.

“That it, buddy?” Reese chuckled, throwing an arm around Colt’s shoulders. “Do you get the hot flashes?”

I snickered and returned my attention to Sierra.

“Have you noticed anything different with Nathan lately?” I asked for only her to hear. The Nathan-Ash topic wasn’t new for us, so she knew what I meant.

She leaned in to respond just as Nora rushed by with Lane, with Ty moseying along after, and it took me a beat to refocus.

“...been depressed for a damn year, so no, I can’t say there’s been a recent change,” Sierra murmured. “He was dating someone last fall, but it ended within a month or two. Can’t really blame the sub either—Nathan tried too hard. Like, he went all in but couldn’t commit. He made plans but canceled a lot.”

As I'd figured. Those two men needed to get their shit together.

You're one to talk.

Whatever.

Once the party started, the DMs scattered, and I watched Sierra make a beeline for Nathan's station. Meanwhile, I saw Nora get in line by the stage, and I couldn't help myself. I walked closer, all while telling myself I had a responsibility. I couldn't stare at her all day. My job was to provide assistance, safety, and answer questions.

But this area needed those things too, right? Colt, Reese, and Dean had migrated to the other end of the club, so yeah.

"Ma'am! Mistress Penelope!" Little Ivy maneuvered through the crowd forming, and I smiled as I laid eyes on her growing belly. She didn't have that long to go now.

"Look at you, sugar." I gave her a hug and then inched back to cup her cheek. I loved seeing the happiness in her eyes. "Beautiful."

"Don't tell me I'm glowing," she joked. "I'm so ready for this kicker to slide right out of me."

I laughed and eased away. "Do you honestly think there will be much sliding involved?"

She let out a chuckled whine and stomped her foot.

"Ivy! C'mere, you brat! Your Owners told me you're mine for the day!" That was Beau.

“Oops.” Ivy grinned sheepishly.

“Where are your Owners?” I had to ask.

“They’re putting together the nursery at home,” she replied, backing away. “We’ll talk later? I miss you!”

“I’ll be around.” I smiled and watched her disappear again.

Everyone was in love, having kids, and getting married...

Ugh, I needed Ash here, so we could bitch to each other again.

As if on cue, I heard Nora’s soft laughter over the cacophony of noise, and I spotted her in the line, chatting up someone I hadn’t seen before.

I cleared my throat and decided to move on. Beau and Ivy had their stage covered, the kinksters watching weren’t being too loud, and it was a station involving very few risks.

I lasted about fifteen minutes.

I helped a sub get over his nerves in order to try nipple clamps, I spoke to two Tops, and I witnessed the line Nora was in get shorter and shorter until she was next.

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She beamed as she jumped up to talk to Beau, and Ivy assisted with the instructions for the first two poses.

Seeing Nora on her knees like that, perfect posture, so much grace... Why did I even pretend to have resolve? I couldn't make my way over there fast enough.

“In the end, your Top decides how these poses will be modified, but this one is a common pose for presentation that some—or most—call the Nadu,” Beau explained. He spoke to her as much as he spoke to those observing. “Sit on your heels and spread your knees.”

I took in my surroundings, making sure I wasn't needed anywhere else, before I allowed myself a few seconds to let the world disappear. Nora obeyed swiftly and got into position, her gaze fixed forward and her shoulders squared.

“Excellent,” Beau commented. “Then you turn your hands, palms up, and rest them on your thighs.”

Damn near flawless.

Nora wasn't merely beautiful; she was fucking adorable in tiny cotton shorts and a snug top. She pulled off gracefulness with a side of a crooked smile and eyes glinting with joy. She loved this. She was happy.

When Beau eased the end of a cane up her throat, to lift her chin slightly, I envied a goddamn object.

That should be my fingers making sure her chin was held high.

“And close your eyes,” Beau murmured.

Right then and there, Nora’s gaze landed on me. I felt the connection like two wires with magnetic tips rushing together with a snick. And the sensation didn’t fade as she closed her eyes and released a long breath.

“Gorgeous. That’s so good,” Ivy praised. “You have great posture, Nora.”

Fuck, I had to get away from her if I was gonna be able to do my job. I cleared my throat and averted my?—

“Penelope?”

No.

I froze at the sound of Ella’s voice coming from behind me. Why the fuck was she here? I didn’t wanna face her. I didn’t want the anger and the hurt to come rushing back. At a complete loss about my future or not—fine, I could live with that—I’d dealt with the past. We were so done.

I drew a breath and braced myself mentally, then reluctantly turned around and came face-to-face with my darling cheater of an ex-girlfriend.

No changes, at least. It felt weird to see her, and I’d half expected her to look different, though I didn’t know why. It was the same old her. And no hurt. Yet. Or anger. Just annoyance because she was here.

She took a few tentative steps forward, and a sub snuck between us on his way somewhere.

Suddenly, I would give anything to get back to watching Nora. She was...the opposite of what I had in front of me. Nora was a breath of fresh air. Ella was tainted by her betrayal. Her blond hair and brown eyes that'd once reeled me in just made me see another woman's hands on her. I could picture Ella's expression contorting in pain and pleasure while she was with someone else.

Weirdly enough, it didn't bother me as much as it had a few months ago.

I was simply...over her.

What a fucking relief.

I exhaled and folded my arms over my chest. "Make it quick. I'm on DM duty."

To be honest, I couldn't see this working out. We couldn't share this community. She had to go. She had to realize this was a dead end.

Her gaze flickered with uncertainty. "I know. I was, um, just wondering if we could talk after the party?"

Talk about what?

"I have plans." It was the truth. "What's there to talk about?"

I caught one of my big oafs moving in the background—Colt, and he mouthed, "You okay?" to me.

I nodded subtly, grateful for him. He nodded once in return and got back to what he was doing.

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Ella didn't conceal her disappointment. "I want to say us, but I get the feeling you're just gonna say there is no us."

"I'm glad you get that feeling," I replied. "Honestly—" Fuck. I saw someone get upset over by a St. Andrews cross, so I told Ella she'd have to find me later. I hurried over there and stayed behind the Top for the moment.

This wasn't part of the event; the Top and his sub were playing on their own, and it was easy to see the boy wasn't a fan of restraints.

I gently put a hand on the Top's back as he dug out a flogger from his duffel.

He startled and glanced back at me.

"Safeword reminder right now, please," I told him, gesturing to the sub.

The Top turned to his boy again, visibly concerned, but he didn't appear to be surprised by the sub being distraught. "What's your color, baby?"

The boy sniffled and clenched his fists. "G-green. I promise."

So far, so good. "Does he ever struggle to safeword?" I kept my voice down so only the boy's Top heard me. I'd seen them around before, so I knew they'd been together for a while.

"Not at all," the man assured. Then he furrowed his brow. "Maybe I should've given a heads-up before...? We're trying to work past one of his triggers, and he feels more

comfortable in a crowd.” He held up the flogger. “This is to distract him. He loves being flogged.”

I’d heard what I needed to hear—for now. I thanked him—and apologized for interrupting—and then I walked away so I could watch from a safer distance. The boy hadn’t been shocked out of the scene, and that was good. Interrupting Tops had to happen occasionally. But these two appeared to have a solid dynamic. I kept an eye on them as the Top started flogging his boy, and the shift was pretty immediate. The sub went from trembling and whimpering to finding a comfort zone in the thuddy pain.

My shoulders lost the last of their tension when I heard how communicative the Top was. He praised his boy a lot, said he was proud of him, and spoke of his progress.

“I’m doing it, Daddy,” the boy chuckled tearfully.

“Fuck yeah, you are.” The Top was clearly proud. “You wanna go get ice cream now, or?—”

“A little longer.” And the boy was determined.

I’d seen enough now too.

I smiled a little to myself and moved on.

No matter how many years I’d been so heavily involved in kink, these situations never failed to put me on a roller coaster of emotions, and they happened so swiftly that most of them didn’t register until it was all over. The nervousness and worry that something might be wrong. The risks, the unknowns, the red flags. The doubts that sometimes lingered, when you just had to keep on watching to make sure...

Then the rewarding relief and joy of seeing a sub push through a discomfort or trigger.

In a world where pain was loved by many and tears could be months of pressure unleashing, we had less to go on when we calculated danger. Something that looked terrifying and upsetting could be healing and filled with satisfaction.

At the same time, something usually went sideways at events like this one when many newbies wanted to try something they'd only read about, so we had to be prepared. But sideways didn't mean catastrophic. Nine times out of ten, it was merely a sub needing the scene to end right then and there. And we were a community that encouraged safewording freely and frequently. We believed it promoted trust and openness, not to mention it removed some of the stigma. Too many subs feared calling red because that might bruise the foundation of a dynamic, and some Tops too—they viewed it as a personal failure to hear their sub call red.

Those mind-sets needed to be crushed like a bug.

As if someone was reading my damn mind, I heard a male voice choke out yellow, and I spun around. Okay, never mind, Reese and Dean were on the case.

My heart drummed a little faster, and I thought of River. No wonder he hated these newbie events. They put us through the emotional wringer.

Ella caught up with me minutes later, and I almost snapped at her. We were busy; all DMs were on high alert, and if I couldn't take the time to indulge in watching Nora, I sure as hell couldn't stand here and talk to my ex.

That was all she was now. An ex. A memory. Part of my past.

"I sincerely don't get what we have to talk about," I told her. "But either way, now's

not the time, and?—”

“Red! I’m sorry, fuck, red!”

I sucked in a breath, instantly recognizing Nora’s voice, and Ella was forgotten. I was moving through the crowd before I even noticed it. Ella called after me, saying she wanted to wait by my cabin for the event to be over, and I just—fuck, I didn’t even know. I answered on autopilot over my shoulder, like a sure, fine, whatever, before I made my way toward...it had to be Nathan’s station.

“Everyone back off,” he commanded firmly.

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Gretchen swooped in to get the line of members to back away.

I snuck between a visibly worried Lane and Kit, and I had to stop myself before I crossed a line. First and foremost, Nathan was the one handling the scene, and he was squatting down in front of Nora, who looked like she'd collapsed on the floor. He was cutting the rope harness he'd put her in.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered.

"You have absolutely nothing to apologize for, pet." He made quick work of removing the last rope, and then he grasped her hands to feel her fingers. "Any more tingling or numbness than before?"

She sniffled. "Not really—it was the position. The rope cinched too hard around my s-shoulders and feet when I lost my footing."

He nodded once. "You think you can stand?"

Goddamn her for putting my heart in a vise. I took a steadying breath, telling myself she didn't look too upset, and I turned around to face the others.

"Give us more space, people," I said.

When I turned back to Nathan and Nora, she was on her feet, and he was keeping her close.

"We'll put that smile back on your face soon, but you gotta humor my rigger brain so

I can rule out nerve damage. Okay?” While Nathan spoke, he ran his hands up and down her arms, going through with his exam. I’d seen it several times before, and he knew what he was doing. “What about here?” He traced two fingers over a spot where I could see the rope had dug in.

She wiped her cheek and shook her head. “No, Sir. It was really just those last seconds when I slipped.”

“That’s good to hear. Let’s go find a quiet place, shall we?” Nathan didn’t wait for a response, instead turning to Gretchen. “Close the station for half an hour, at least. I’ll be back later.”

“Understood, Sir.” Gretchen nodded.

Knowing the drill from here, I offered to grab an aftercare kit, and Nathan nodded in thanks.

“We’ll be on the front porch,” he said.

Good spot.

I made my way out of the club and down the hall to the nearest supply closet, where we kept the aftercare kits. Nathan undoubtedly had some stuff already, but he’d be more focused on Nora’s nerves and possibly fear. Whereas the kit’s job was to turn a frown upside down. They had funny Band-Aids, aloe, tissues, chocolate—shit like that.

In the kitchen, I grabbed a soda too.

Before I went to join Nathan and Nora, I spotted Lucas and asked if he could cover for me for a moment.

“Yeah, of course. No problem. Is everything all right?”

“I think so. Thanks, hon. I’ll give you an update later.” I hurried back toward the front of the house, through the lobby, and pushed open the doors.

I arrived on the scene right in time to allow myself an ounce of relief. Nathan and Nora were sitting on one of the sofas, and he was testing the strength in her fingers by having her pinch his hands.

“Ouch—okay, go again,” he chuckled.

She was grinning, and her blue eyes were only a little red. “It would hurt less if I did this to your leg or something.”

He smiled a little. “It’s easier for me to measure your strength in my hands. Besides, a brat like you enjoys this much more.”

Her grin turned sheepish.

I loved Nathan. I didn’t know him as well as I wanted to, but I loved him. The way a Dom performed aftercare spoke volumes about them.

“I see you put the smile back on her face.” I went over to them and sat down on the other sofa. “How’re you feeling, sweetie?” I set the soda in front of her.

“Much better, thank you,” she said. “It only hurt when my feet slipped, and I panicked.”

Nathan gathered her hands in his and gave them a squeeze. “She was a six on the pain scale with slight tingling less than a minute before she dropped, and I can’t find any reasons to be concerned.”

“The slightest tingling,” Nora added.

I was glad to hear it.

“Great news. What position were you in?” I wondered. I’d only seen the traces of a beautiful upper-body harness, but she’d had rope around her ankles as well.

Nathan smirked as Nora scowled.

“It was one of those wall-sits that are, like, impossible,” she huffed. “And super uncomfortable!”

I grinned. Those were fun. Back against the wall, nothing holding the sub up except the strength in their legs. And add a harness to that? I was sad I’d missed it.

“Predicament bondage isn’t supposed to be comfortable,” Nathan teased.

“Yeah, I got that.” Nora mock-scowled at him before she turned to me. “It gets worse. The rope tightened if I slid down the wall, and guess what happened.”

I laughed softly.

She sighed a little after that, and she glanced back at Nathan. “I’m sorry I massacred the rope. It felt amazing before I lost my strength.”

He chuckled her lightly on the chin. “There’s plenty of rope, brat. There’s only one of you.”

Wasn't that the truth.

"It's not the first bundle to be sacrificed," I said. "Won't be the last either."

Nathan agreed.

"Still." Nora made a face. "Wouldn't it have been enough to just untie me quickly?"

Nathan and I shook our heads, but I let him answer.

"If you ever visit me in the dojo upstairs, you'll learn just how frequently I talk about nerve damage. It can set in rapidly, and it can be permanent. Ten bucks' worth of rope has nothing on you not feeling your fingers for weeks to come."

"Maybe we could visit him together, hon." The words left my mouth before I could think twice—but...I didn't take them back. For two reasons. First and foremost, we liked to get subs back on the horse to repeat a scene that somehow didn't work out initially. Secondly, I wanted to. I wanted plans with her.

She looked surprised.

"I'd like that," Nathan said.

"Me too." Nora's smile was something else. "Are you a rigger too, Ma'am?"

"Oh no, I'll just spot Nathan," I chuckled. "I'm more of a cuff 'em and pin 'em down kind of Top."

"My favorite." The dorky brat made an appearance by waggling her eyebrows, and I could only shake my head in amusement. "I like bondage too, though." She faced Nathan again. "You wouldn't mind topping me sometime?"

“Not at all. It would be fun,” he answered.

“Great! Now I just gotta get Mistress Penelope to top me too.” She batted her lashes at me, and I smirked. Oh, I was screwed. “I mean, think about it. I have Nathan for bondage and Ash for the next Game, so one might?—”

“Ash?” Nathan straightened and composed his face, but I caught the way the corners of his eyes tightened a little.

“Oh crap.” Nora slapped a hand over her mouth. “I forgot you’re you, Sir. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought him up.”

He feigned dismissiveness. “It’s okay. I know he’s back in the community. We’re bound to run into each other at some point.”

Yeah, but did he really anticipate that, or was he just saying it? Because it wouldn’t surprise me if Ash wasn’t the only one hiding behind the kids. With them sharing custody and going every other week like that, they technically shared custody of Mclean too.

“Either way, I’m sorry,” Nora murmured. “Also, I’m totally fine if you wanna get back to your station. No trauma here, I swear.”

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Nathan smiled faintly. “I’m in no rush. You sure you’re okay?”

Nora nodded. “I’m gonna make Mistress Penelope stay with me for a moment, but that’s for other reasons.”

Oh, really.

Well...I wasn’t going to fight her.

“Okay, then.” Nathan conceded. “I’d like you to shoot me a friend request online so we can exchange numbers. That way, I can check in with you later tonight.”

“Will do, Sir,” Nora promised. “What’s your name on the forum?”

“Just Rigger,” Nathan answered. He gave Nora’s leg a brief squeeze before he rose to his feet. “We’ll talk later, then. You did good today, brat. You safeworded when you were supposed to.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Nora smiled. “Mishap aside, I loved the scene. I’m looking forward to exploring more bondage.”

“Straight to a rope rigger’s heart.” Nathan clutched his heart and grinned. He flicked me a glance next. “You’ll stay with her for a while?”

“Absolutely. I’ll keep you posted too.”

“Thanks, hon. I’ll see you around.” He headed back inside, and I let out a breath.

We were alone.

I kinda needed it. Even though I could see she was fine, I wanted some alone time with her.

“Hi.” She grabbed her soda and moved over to my sofa, where she plopped down with a cute grin. “He’s so nice. I’m gonna tell Ash later that Nathan is nice, because we text now.”

“You do, huh?”

She nodded. “Yes, Ma’am. He’s Big Bear, and I’m li’l cub. We have a thing. We quiz each other so we can get to know each other better before the Game.”

In other words, someone was fitting in perfectly.

“Without spoiling anything for the event, getting to know each other is very good,” I replied. “It’s not just limits that need to be discussed. Preferences too.”

She cocked her head. “I feel like you’re trying to tell me something.”

I chuckled. “Call it minor assistance to a dynamic that might have a slight disadvantage because you’re new to each other. But if you keep going, you’ll be fine.”

She pursed her lips, determination taking over. “Okay. We’re gonna quiz each other even harder and bring home the trophy. So to speak. And with that out of the way, let’s not discuss boys for a while.” She exaggerated a wink as she opened her soda.

My jaw fucking hurt from smiling. “You’re a dork, you know that?”

“I may have heard that before, but it’s okay. Dorks have more fun.”

Maybe she was right.

I swallowed and felt the mirth fade, because...had I forgotten how to have fun? I’d felt weighed down by something for longer than I cared to admit. Whatever it was...had kept me from experiencing unbridled fun—the kind where you laughed till you cried or almost peed your pants, the kind that gave your stomach a workout from all the laughing.

“Something just happened.” Nora scooted closer with a concerned look on her face, so she must’ve noticed my mood tanking. “Are you okay?”

Was I?

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “It’s possible it’s been too long since I knew how to have fun. I... I used to be more upbeat, quick to sling jokes and put together a party. I miss that woman.”

Had someone like Shay approached me five or six years ago, with the idea of pranking both Tops and bottoms together, my approach would’ve been different. I would’ve lit up internally. I would’ve fired up my brain to think of all the ways we could raise hell. Now—I mean, I had agreed, so I wasn’t completely dead. Not all hope was lost. But I still had a long way to go if I wanted to be that person again.

“Maybe a dorky brat could teach you?” Nora suggested.

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I grinned. “I’ve heard of worse ideas.” Then I gathered her hands in mine and kissed her knuckles, and I was rewarded with a faint blush bleeding onto her cheeks. “You’re getting under my skin, honey. That wasn’t the plan.”

She bit her lip as if she was trying to contain her smile. “To quote you from last night, that’s honest.”

Yeah, well.

“When one’s resolve breaks into a million pieces, all you have left is honesty.”

Part of me was still too wounded to rush into anything. Wounded from losing myself, nothing else. But I’d be an idiot if I didn’t at least give Nora a shot. She wanted it; I did too. Hell, I couldn’t go the whole event without seeking her out.

I wanted to open up to her. Tell her everything about myself, learn everything about her too, and pray she’d be okay with my sexuality being a little different.

“My heart’s freaking hammering right now,” she admitted.

She knew just what to say too. She made me hope. She ignited something within me that’d been stone-cold for years.

I leaned in and kissed her, and I cupped her cheek.

She smiled and kissed me back, and we—fuck, were interrupted by someone leaving. Or stepping out for a smoke. Whatever. Immediately annoyed, I broke the kiss and

looked toward the door, only to see Ella there.

Good grief.

Excellent timing, really.

Seeing hurt slash through Ella's features didn't make a lick of sense, but I did see the fake indifference and anger coming from a mile away.

"I waited for you," she said.

Nora cleared her throat and made a move to back away, and I didn't let her. She wasn't the intruder here; Ella was.

"I don't know why," I replied. "I've told you we have nothing to talk about."

Ella's jaw ticked, and she slid her gaze at Nora, then back to me. "It didn't take you long to find a new toy."

"Oh, meow." Nora lifted a brow at her. "Have your claws always been catty, or is that a new feature?"

Salty hothead incoming.

I squeezed her hand and suppressed my smirk, because Ella was one insult away from lashing out.

"In response to what you said—I waited longer than you," I told her. "You can leave now."

She gnashed her teeth and stood there silently for a moment, but she had nothing. In

the end, she headed down the porch steps and strode across the lawn toward the carport.

If I could catch a break, that would be the last I ever saw of her.

“So that was Ella.”

Nora snorted softly. “I saw her inside earlier. I guess she has some regrets.”

So she’d heard through the grapevine how our relationship had ended. I wasn’t surprised.

“I couldn’t care less.” I cared about what was right in front of me. I had to make sure I didn’t push Nora away anymore, and then... Fuck, I was too scared to hope or have any expectations, but I was going to open myself up for baby steps toward a future that didn’t depress me.

That was something, wasn’t it?

“What does the rest of your weekend look like?” I asked.

She quirked a curious smile and tilted her head. “I work tomorrow, ten to four. Then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, ten to six.”

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That sounded like retail. “What do you do?”

“I work at a reptile center in Arlington,” she responded. “Tiny place—it’s just the owner, me, and another part-time employee.”

All...righty...then. Reptiles. Snakes and stuff. Lizards. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised, given how close she and Lane were. Lane and Ty, with a side of Noa, were our reptile wizards.

“You like snakes and lizards,” I deduced.

She snickered, possibly because of my expression. I didn’t hate creepy-crawlies; I wasn’t afraid of snakes or anything, but I wasn’t fond of them either. I’d grown up in rattlesnake territory outside LA, so I could identify which ones got to stay on the property, which ones had to be removed, and which ones made me scream for Dad to take over.

“I love them, but I’ll never own one myself,” she answered. “The species I’m into are time-consuming and pretty expensive, so I’ll stick to working with reptiles and cuddling Lane’s babies.”

Lane’s babies.

“Have you heard of cats and dogs?” I had to ask.

She laughed and gave my arm an “oh, you” shove. “I love them too! But I live in a two-bedroom with three roommates, so that’s not happening anytime soon either.”

Oh, I remembered those days. When I'd moved out east for college, I'd shared a studio off campus with two other girls.

"But, so to, uh, circle back to what you asked earlier," she went on. "I don't have anywhere to be until ten tomorrow morning. Just so we're clear."

I smiled. I liked the sound of that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nora Lilja

A few days later

"Someone's got a date. You never rush out of here," Cal noted.

I smirked and shouldered my messenger bag. "I have more than a date. I have a sleepover." And the woman I'd be spending the night with was currently outside waiting to pick me up.

I was in heaven.

Well, cuddle heaven—so far. We'd spent the night on Saturday too, but nothing had happened besides kissing and cuddling. Which, to be honest, had been all kinds of perfect, because the Mistress in Penelope had come out to play. She hadn't allowed me to derail her for a second. And she was clearly on a mission to get to know me.

"So that's why you asked Ted to cover for you tomorrow?"

"Guilty," I sang. "And on Sunday. See you next week!"

He chuckled. “Have a good one, kid.”

I blew kisses to my favorite lizards on the way out of the shop—particularly Daycrawler, who was being picked up by her new owner this weekend. They’d probably name her something ridiculous. To me, she’d always be Daycrawler.

I stepped out of one humid place and into another, though it wasn’t that bad yet. Come June, I’d hate Virginia just a little bit. It was why I tried to live in a swimming pool during the summer.

Just like she’d said in her text, Penelope was parked right outside in her old truck, and I beamed and opened the door.

“Hi!”

“Hey, sweet girl.” She patted the spot next to her, and I was quick to jump in. “You looking forward to a few days off?”

“So much.” I leaned over and kissed her cheek, because I wanted to. We didn’t have boundaries; otherwise, I would’ve gone straight for her kissable lips. But I had hope. The questions she asked me, the interest she had in my life—it wasn’t what one subjected a future buddy to so eagerly.

Last weekend, after the party, we’d spent a couple hours with the others by the pool, grilling burgers and talking and cozying it up in a lounge. And then she’d invited me to her cabin, where we’d lost track of time swapping childhood stories and how we’d eventually found kink. She’d once been invited to a party, whereas I’d found BDSM reading romance novels.

We’d friended each other online too, and we’d talked about friends’ activity in albums, discussion groups, and journals.

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I wanted another weekend like that, only we switched out a daytime party for the big Game, and maybe we added sex to the repertoire, before we cuddled and talked all night.

Penelope had set a pace that I found myself needing but not wanting. The impatient girl who'd had a crush on Penelope for so long wanted to get down and dirty right freaking now, but I wasn't sure my mind would be at ease if we'd gone that route. Instead, we'd texted a lot the past few days, and before we'd parted ways on Sunday morning, our alone time together had been so...almost tranquil. And fun.

"When were you and Ash getting together?" she asked.

"Tomorrow," I answered. "He said he was bringing dinner."

We were gonna discuss the last details of our boundaries and so on.

Penelope nodded and slowed down before a red light. "If you don't mind, I'd like to sit in on your negotiation."

Mind? Uh, no. Her wanting to join only showcased her interest.

"I don't mind at all." I smiled. "By the way, I saw you announced the next Game already online."

She inclined her head. "It's an annual event, so the Game will piggyback on the theme."

An annual masquerade ball? Sign me up! With the announcement, they'd posted a couple photos from last year, and everyone had been dressed to the nines. It took place the first weekend of May, so I was gonna make sure I had that Sunday off too.

"Would you like to attend with me?"

Yes! A thousand times yes!

"I'd love to." Gah, I wanted to bite her arm or something. Excitement bubbled up within me, and I couldn't wait to find out what it would feel like to be her submissive.

Hopefully, I'd get a taste of that before the next Game. Today was Wednesday, and my schedule was wide open.

Before heading out to Mclean, Penelope proposed dinner, so we went to a Mexican place not far from where I lived. They had awesome queso, which really said a lot about a Mexican restaurant.

Once we'd ordered, my phone dinged with a message, and the designated tone let me know it was a certain group chat. But it would have to wait. I'd see Macklin and some of the others in an hour or so. He was the leader of this brat chat pack.

I put my phone on silent instead, and Penelope smiled and grabbed my hand on the table.

That gesture did something to me. As if I'd been floating in space before, she reeled me in and made me focus on my surroundings and on her. This was a date, wasn't it? The tables did have tealights and white tablecloths to go with the multicolored cantina atmosphere. And everybody knew that candles and tablecloths meant date. Right?

“Did Master Lucian really send someone to assemble your furniture?” I asked.

She chuckled and nodded once. “Yup. They showed up bright and early on Monday. Two guys—they looked kinda lost on the property.”

I grinned. Well, aside from one of two features, nobody could guess it was a kink place from the outside.

Our sodas arrived, along with a basket of chips, salsa, and queso, and my stomach snarled with want.

“It feels nice to have the bed upstairs again,” she said, dragging a chip through the salsa. “And I can eat at a table instead of sitting on a mattress or a moving box.”

That was my everyday life, sans moving boxes. “You should see my place. My roommates are musicians, so our tiny kitchen is their storage space for instruments. Thankfully, I have my own room—they share. There isn’t much of a living room either.”

“Have you lived there long?”

“About two years,” I said, thinking back. “I returned home to Sweden for uni studies, and when I graduated, I was like, I can’t live with my parents again.” I chuckled and grabbed a couple chips. “Mom didn’t get it. She was all, you have more space in your old room, and you wouldn’t have to pay rent. And Dad kinda nudged her and was like, honey, she wants privacy. She’d rather pay rent and live in a dump than have us breathing down her neck.”

Penelope laughed. “I was the same way, except I had less of a choice. My dad didn’t understand why I didn’t move back to LA after I graduated. He kept saying I’d have less pressure if I stayed at home—I wouldn’t have to rush to find a job I wasn’t happy

with—but...” She shrugged. “I’d found my home out here. And when you’re young, it’s okay to have two or three roommates and virtually no money because you’re free. Just...wait a few years, and you’ll start thinking it wouldn’t have been so bad to live with your parents.”

I snickered. Maybe she was right; maybe she wasn’t. It wasn’t like I enjoyed the no-money part, but yeah. I loved having my mother across town.

“I don’t know. I love my mom, and we have a great relationship, but it’s nice to have a Metro ride between us,” I said. “I hope...” Oh shit. I swallowed, and I accidentally forced down a piece of chip that was a size too large. Fuck. Ouch. Ohhh, the pain I put myself through in order not to say too much. I’d almost said I hoped Penelope wanted to meet my parents soon.

Yikes.

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“Are you okay?” She was one part concerned and one part amused.

I coughed and guzzled my Sprite. “Dandy,” I croaked. And then I was always going to be me, and I found a way to say too much anyway. “I almost brought up meeting the parents with a woman who’s sworn off relationships, and now I’m paying for it.”

I rubbed my chest as the chip finally went down.

Penelope turned pensive, and the amusement softened in her eyes. “I’m going to try to be as honest as you are—because it’s very refreshing.” She paused, and I felt myself hold my breath. “I recently spent ten years with someone I thought I was going to grow old with,” she started by saying. “When that didn’t happen, I...I felt lost. And I still do, to a degree. I fell out of love with her, and it made me see all the flaws in our dynamic. I realized how the last few years had blinded me. I didn’t see my own unhappiness.”

I exhaled unsteadily.

“I’m not blind any longer, though.” She reached for my hand on the table again and linked our fingers together. “Even though it’s too soon for me to hope and have expectations, I recognize a forever-kind of girl when I see one, and I can’t be a for-the-night partner with her. I have to give her an honest chance. For her sake and mine.”

Herrejävlagud, jag tror jag älskar dig redan.

What did I say to that? How could I respond without it sounding super lame?

Heat bled onto my cheeks, and I swallowed hard.

“What, um...what makes you think I’m a forever-kind of girl?” I asked.

She smiled. “When I met Ella, I got swept away in a whirlwind that took me months to recover from—and in retrospect, I overlooked some things I shouldn’t have. With you, I don’t need or want the whirlwind. I think about you day and night, regardless. And I want to know everything about you. You’re stuck in my head like the most annoying song.”

She smirked to show she was teasing, and I felt so relieved. I needed that pressure release, mostly because I couldn’t form a coherent response, given the gravity of what she’d shared.

But man, did I light up like a Christmas tree. “You better learn the lyrics, Ma’am, ’cause I’m not going anywhere.”

She grinned and squeezed my hand. “Good. Just be patient with me. I’m not used to being rattled.”

“Do I rattle you?” I didn’t know why that made me smug.

“Girl, where do I begin,” she laughed.

Right here. This was our beginning. I could feel it. She was going to give us a chance.

A couple hours later, we were a world away, enjoying the last of the sunlight by the pool in Mclean. Penelope kept her hands to herself, for the most part, but she sure didn’t mind my going topless.

We shared a lounge, we shared a private little bubble, and we shared a drink.

“Gorgeous...” She dipped down and kissed my jaw, and I sighed contentedly and stretched out alongside her.

We didn’t have to talk much for me to know she was processing a lot. I caught her looking at me often, and I could tell she was living in her head tonight. And I couldn’t blame her. Maybe I wasn’t bringing a whirlwind into a future dynamic we might share, but I’d heard more than once that I could be a whirlwind all on my own.

“May I ask what you’re thinking about?” I asked.

She released a breath and caught a piece of my hair between her fingers. “Just...how you stormed into my life.”

Case in point. Storm, whirlwind, same thing.

“You’ve forced me to reconsider some things,” she murmured. “In a good way.”

I bit my lip, hesitating for a quick beat. “As long as I don’t overwhelm you. I’ve heard I can be...too much.”

She knitted her brows together and shook her head. “No. Think it of like the worst ringtone imaginable to wake up to, but the moment you wake up, you remember you’re going on a vacation.”

I exhaled a laugh, unsure that was a good thing. Even if I was off on an adventure I’d been looking forward to, I wanted to wake up without an alarm!

“Well, aren’t you two fuckin’ cute,” a very male voice said, bursting our bubble. It was Reese—I was fairly certain. Yeah, it had to be him. With the Tenley twins, you had to look at their tattoos to make sure.

He shed his tee and tossed it on a lounge, and it was followed by his trunks.

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Penelope and I had gotten a glorious half hour all to ourselves.

“Always so naked,” Penelope said in response.

“Pffft, fuck that.” Reese gestured at me. “I have Nora on my side now. I don’t wanna hear shit about how little I wear.”

I smirked. “I’m gonna ride on a myth and claim I’m European, so that’s my topless excuse.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “I’m Southern. We need signs to tell us to wear shirts and shoes.”

I cracked up. He had a point!

Penelope’s shoulders shook with her silent laughter.

Reese dove into the pool at the same time as River and Shay emerged from their cabin, carrying towels and wearing trunks.

“Hi, Shay.” I waved. “Hello, Sir.”

River nodded once. “Evenin’.”

“Hey.” Shay walked over to us and lifted a brow at me. “Did you see the latest post from that weird account?”

I sat up instantly. “No—when was it? I checked it this morning.”

“Yeah, they posted about an hour ago,” he replied.

Oh my God, I had to check. I reached for my phone, and in my periphery, I noticed more people arriving. Two people I didn’t recognize, plus Gretchen. The latest addition to my friends list online. Like Nathan, she had reached out to me after I’d safeworded at their station, and I couldn’t really get past how compassionate they were here. Nathan had texted me both the same evening after the event and then the morning after too. Just to check in and make sure I was okay.

I exchanged a quick hello with Gretchen before she ducked into the club area, and then I went to my Mclean app to look up this new @OverheardMclean account.

For the past few days, someone had been posting things they’d “overheard” out here, kind of like the accounts dedicated to major cities on Instagram. Followers could send in quotes and conversations they’d heard, and the account posted them.

“I’m wondering if it’s Tate,” Shay said.

I didn’t know Tate well enough.

I scrolled till I saw the post.

Bottom: I’m just saying, you should watch yourself, Sir.

Top: When I do, people call me vain. Make up your mind.

Bottom: Ugh, you know what I mean!

“Who’s being quoted?” I glanced up at Shay.

“Noa and Lucian,” he replied. “Thing is, I was there when this happened the other day, and the only one who could’ve sent that in—aside from Noa and Lucian—is Kit. Which means we have both Tops and bottoms submitting quotes. It’s gonna be impossible to figure out who’s behind it.”

The plot thickens...

I did know Penelope had sent in something that Reese had said.

“So we can rule out that it’s a brat versus Sadist thing,” I deduced.

Shay nodded.

I saw Reese swimming closer. “Y’all talkin’ about the gossip account? I’m still gonna make you pay, Pen.”

Pen snickered and took a swig from our drink. “Come on—it’s fun! You’re so quotable.”

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River snorted under his breath, having sat down a couple loungers over with a book.

My attention shifted when I spotted Macklin and his Owner arriving, and I alerted Shay. It was our cue. We had business to tend to now!

“I’ll be back in a bit.” I kissed Penelope’s cheek, then reached for my tank top.

“And where are you off to?” Reese eyed both Shay and me.

Shay responded. “Macklin’s gonna give us pointers on how to be good slaves for the Game.”

He was such a good liar.

“Come on, my pretty little pets!” Macklin called from the other side of the pool. “Let me see what I have to work with.”

He and Shay must’ve agreed on our cover beforehand.

“If you break my boy, I expect a new one,” Reese told Macklin.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Shay said dryly.

I snickered and followed him around the pool.

This was going to be fun!

But brat business aside, it wouldn't hurt me to ask Macklin for slave pointers. It was gonna be a popular event. Over twenty couples had signed up, and I had a competitive streak.

“Make yourself comfortable...”

Um, could I move in? Because that would be comfortable.

While Penelope was in the bathroom, I wandered around her little cabin and couldn't stop staring. It was so beautiful with all the new furniture and decorations. Super cozy. Warm colors, low lighting, a very comfy-looking couch, thick rug, round kitchen table that seated four, and potted plants in every nook and cranny.

I could honestly live here.

It just felt like a 100% stress-free environment. In fact, I yawned when I plopped down on the couch. And the couch tried to swallow me up.

I should've changed into PJs right away, because I wasn't sure I could get out of this thing.

Leaning back against the cushions, I eyed the black-and-white photos on the wall across the room, and it was easy to see the love Penelope had for this community. There was one picture that brought an instant smile to my face. Greer had thrown Penelope over his shoulder, and he was sprinting toward the pool. Their faces were frozen in laughter—possibly some screaming from Penelope too.

Another photo was of her and Macklin grinning and eating something. Like a pastry, maybe? They had whipped cream or frosting everywhere.

Colt and Lucas leaning close to each other with a fire running in the background,

private smiles on their faces. Colt and River working up a sweat with shovels and—oh, it had to be from back when they built the deck. I spotted stacks with floorboards behind them, and the deck area was cleared. Reese and Greer were measuring something for the cabins in one photo too. Lucian had his brows knitted in concentration, and he was holding a clipboard and a calculator. He was casually dressed, which was rare for him. He looked a bit younger in that picture.

This was Penelope's Founders wall. Community history.

I wanted so badly for Mclean to be my new kinky home.

I heard the toilet flush and the water run, and the latter went on for a while. I didn't know her plans, though I'd gotten the impression we weren't going to bed yet. It wasn't that late anyway. A little past eleven.

She'd been teasing me all evening too, so I needed me some action!

Eventually, the door opened, and I nearly swallowed my tongue.

Um, hi. May I serve you forever?

Funny how quickly I could suddenly get off the couch.

I didn't know what to do or say; I just stared at her exquisite body, the lace thong she wore, the matching bra, all black... Her hair was down too. Thick, wavy, auburn. Fuck me sideways, this was porn.

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She smirked faintly and nodded up the stairs. “You ready to head up?”

“I’m ready to do whatever you want, Ma’am.”

She chuckled and extended her hand to me. “Let’s go, then. We need to have a talk, and I’d like to do that my way.”

Talk? With words?

We’d see if I could form anything coherent.

I walked over to her and slipped my hand into hers, and she led the way up, which put her delectable ass in my line of sight.

It was so bitable!

“Are you okay with me blindfolding you?” she asked.

No. Not at all. But only because I wanted to stare at her forever.

“If you wish to rob me of my view, yes, I suppose.”

She exhaled a laugh. “You’re wonderful for my ego, pet.”

I was only speaking the truth.

Reaching the landing, I was once again taken aback by the warm and cozy design of

the place. Maybe not taken aback, but it brought me down from my lacy-thong high, and I was catapulted into a space that was all about fluffy pillows, dimmed lighting, and what looked like the most comfortable bed ever. Aside from two nightstands and a dresser—never mind, a chair in the corner too... That was all, though.

She turned around and kissed my cheek. “Lie down on your back at the center of the bed, please.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And strip down...”

I shivered. “Yes, Ma’am.”

I did as told and discarded my top and shorts on the nearest nightstand, and then I crawled up on the bed. Oh my God, super-soft heaven, I’m here. How could anyone be nervous here? Because I was waiting for the nerves to set in, like they often did when I faced a Domme I liked. And this one was so many levels above like that it wasn’t even funny. Yet, zero nerves. It was strange.

Okay, one thing did it. Or two. My stomach tightened a little, and a flurry of anticipation butterflies surged through me when I spotted Penelope digging two pairs of cuffs from a drawer, and a second later, I saw the metal hooks in the bed frame. Solid wood.

“Standard safewords apply,” she said, holding up the cuffs in silent question.

I swallowed. “Green. Very green.”

“Excellent.” She smiled and walked toward me, and I lay down on my back. “I’m going to encourage you to speak freely tonight. No speech restrictions, no rules about

when you get off, when you can moan, or if you beg for more.”

“Understood.”

I sucked in a breath as she straddled my hips and leaned over me.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered.

I swallowed and closed my eyes. Okay, the nerves were settling in. Like a buzz running through me, making me wanna squirm and ask what her plans were.

She blindfolded me first with a silky black thing.

“The topic we’re going to discuss is my sexuality.”

Wait, what? I blinked instinctively, and that didn’t work very well behind the fabric.

“What do you mean, Ma’am?”

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“I’ll explain.” A beat later, her lips were on mine for a brief second, before she handcuffed me to the bed. Arms out, metal closing with a snick-snick-snick. “Not too tight?”

“No, Ma’am.”

What did she mean by her sexuality?

I’d wondered not too long ago if she was bi, considering she’d carried on kink dynamics with at least one man, though those had been nonsexual. Either way, I couldn’t say it would require any lengthy discussion. She could just tell me, and I’d be fine. But hey, if she needed to talk, so be it.

“I suppose I should start by saying that sex and what stimulates me are different,” she admitted. “This right here...? Having you under me, at my mercy, is my sex. Controlling you, pushing you between states of pain and bliss, is my orgasm. It’s what releases endorphins in my brain, and it’s what gives me pleasure.”

Oh. Huh. So she was on the ace spectrum?

“You’re asexual?” I guessed.

“Not quite,” she said. “It can be argued that I’m on that spectrum, but I’m not good with labels. My sex drive, for what’s considered conventional, is low.” She started running her hands up and down my body, testing sensitive spots and where I might be ticklish. “I still feel sexual attraction, I get aroused, and I love to get my sub off. I want to be in sexual situations frequently—but this is how I get off.”

“By being in charge.”

“By being in charge,” she confirmed.

I flinched, and a giggle burst out of me when she reached my rib cage. I couldn’t help it!

“So, um—” I squirmed and tried to shy away from her fingers. “You never come? Like, a regular orgasm?”

“No, I do. It’s just not very often.” She slid farther down my body until she planted her knees between my legs and parted them. “How often would you say you come? On your own, with a partner, doesn’t matter.”

I hummed, thinking about it, but her hands were distracting. She rubbed my thighs so sensually that it was tough to focus. Unhurried movements, fingers inching closer inward...

“I don’t know, maybe three or four times a week...?” I bit my lip. “Sometimes five, sometimes every day, sometimes I can go a week or two without.”

She acknowledged me with a hum of her own, and then she pulled up my knees so my feet were planted firmly on the duvet.

“I might average one a month, but like you, I go through periods when it’s more and sometimes less.”

Oh. All right. The tension between us felt a little off, and I wasn’t sure if she was waiting for me to throw a fit or tell her this wouldn’t be working for me. I’d lusted after Penelope Darling for so long, almost...two years? Something like that? And maybe lusted was a strong word. I’d had girlfriends and playtime arrangements in

that time, but I'd admired her for that long anyway. I'd sought her out online to get a dose of her opinions. I'd read every journal entry she'd posted, and I'd made sure to catch every seminar or demo she'd hosted outside of Mclean.

Getting her off wasn't precisely a deal-breaker.

"The question now is..." Fuck, she dropped low, and I felt the softest kiss at the top of my pussy. "Is this okay with you, Nora?"

I presumed she was asking about the orgasm and sex stuff, not what she was currently derailing my thoughts with.

I took a steadying breath and realized I'd been clenching my fists.

Relax. Deep breaths.

"I have two rules," I said. "I'm monogamous for intimacy and sexual play, and I'm only drawn to women who are dominant. Everything else is just details. My dream to serve you is about accommodating your needs, not my projection of what they might be. It's about making you happy, whether that body worship includes orgasms or massages."

It just wasn't a big deal to me. It might be to some...? But my own pleasure was mainly derived from servitude, not how many times I could get my Top off.

Penelope let out a breath and dropped a kiss along the inside of my thigh.

Maybe she wasn't ready to say anything. Maybe she was processing.

One thing—oh my fuck—she was ready for...was to go down on me. I sucked in a breath and tensed up, and she kept kissing me, only now she was right where I

wanted her. But man, she had all the patience. Soft kisses, wet kisses, firm ones...where she delved deeper with her tongue, and I was squirming again.

“Fuck,” I exhaled.

“My girl will always keep herself smooth for me,” she murmured. “So that I can see her marks and bruises.”

Your girl.

“Yes, Ma’am.” I bit back a moan as she slid a finger deep inside me, quickly followed by a second, and I arched my back. “May I see you, please?”

“Not yet. This is for me.”

Oh God.

I grabbed on to the chains of the cuffs so I didn’t hurt my wrists when I pulled and writhed, because that was clearly where I was heading. She kissed me, fingered me, and licked me as if her goal was for me to lose my mind.

Then she pinched my clit, and I nearly arched off the bed. I gasped loudly and felt the pain shooting through me, intensifying the pleasure.

“I’m going to have so much fun with you, sugar,” she told me.

A resounding smack sounded through the loft, and the air was sucked out of my lungs. Pussy spanking, check! Fuck, fuck, fuck, she was relentless all of a sudden. Her hand came down over and over, until she switched things up with her soft tongue and perfect fingers. Then back to spanking me.

I moaned and whimpered, and the pressure started building up rapidly. The wetter I got, the more the impact sounded—and felt. Sharp pains. Heat. Fucking fire. And I got it. Like servitude was my crack, control was hers, and she played me like a damn fiddle.

She fucked with my head too when she sucked on my clit and squeezed the insides of my thighs so hard that her nails were going to leave a mark. I choked on a gasp, and I wanted to scream as much as I wanted to moan.

“Fuck!” I cried out instead.

“You’re going to bruise beautifully, pet.”

Yeah, my pale ass had heard that before. I whimpered as my eyes burned behind the blindfold, and I started panting like a madwoman.

She hummed against my flesh and pushed me closer and closer toward the cliff. The pain faded, and she finger-fucked me faster, each movement causing slick sounds that filled the air. Along with my heavy breathing. All of it brought me under. I went from knowing that I was getting closer slowly to...holy fuck, I was right there. Drowning in pleasure. I sucked in a final breath and held it, and I tensed up so hard that I trembled. My muscles protested. Sweat beaded on my face.

I was so gone.

I imploded and couldn’t make a single sound, and she kept working me. She fucking controlled my orgasm too. How was that even possible? She increased every ounce of attention that got me off and kept the pain at the perfect level where it just fueled the bliss. Her mouth and tongue never left my clit, but her fingers pinched, and her hands spanked and squeezed.

The faintest whimper left me in the end, allowing me to draw a ragged breath, and she brought me down slowly. Squeezing turned into gentle rubbing, and I shook and shuddered.

Sweet Jesus, I wasn’t sure I could walk now if she asked me to. My whole body felt

like jelly. It was part of the mattress now. A permanent bed feature. Thank you and goodbye. Lights out.

Penelope kissed her way up my body. I was busy panting.

She released me from the cuffs, causing my arms to flop down, and removed the blindfold. A chill hit my face. That felt nice. Okay, I just had to breathe. Breathe and get my heart rate down.

I exhaled and blinked drowsily.

She smiled down at me, and I wanted to...

“I wanna pull you down on me, but I can’t lift my arms,” I croaked.

She chuckled softly and kissed my nose. “Good thing you don’t have to move a muscle for a while. I was thinking I’d get us some drinks and snacks?”

Oh yum.

“I love your post-sex plan,” I said.

“And I...” Her gaze grew gentle, and her smile was filled with warmth. “I love what you said earlier. It means a lot to me.”

I understood what she was referring to, but she had no reason to thank me. I was here for her, no matter what that entailed.

The following day, I was on my own for a while. Penelope and the other organizers of the event got together to hammer out more details, so no bottoms were allowed near the cabin where they sat.

I did absolutely nothing useful, except catch myself staring at Penelope.

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Last night...had changed something.

She'd never uttered the words you're mine or anything like it, but I'd felt it in her touches, in how she'd completely possessed my mind and body. And how she'd opened up too, about her sexuality. She was entrusting me with that, and it brought us closer.

Around noon, Shay, Camden, and I had pizza delivered, and we got comfortable on the deck after fetching cold drinks and napkins.

Camden was cute. He couldn't sit still to save his life, and he was clearly deep into his regression as a Little. He kept talking about how his Daddy was gonna be here soon, and he'd waited forever—as in, forty-eight hours. Said Daddy, Anthony, was a music teacher in New York, so they had an interesting schedule. It was a private academy that allowed for flexibility, partly because Anthony actually ran the whole thing, but they traveled back and forth a whole lot between Nashville and New York—and now DC too, where August was establishing a headquarters of some sort.

“We’re going back to Nashville in two weeks,” Camden went on frankly, despite that no one had prompted a conversation. “I miss all my stuffies, but at the same time, it gives me an excuse to buy more here and in New York. You know?”

Shay and I exchanged a grin.

“Oh, this is so delicious,” Camden gushed around a mouthful of pizza. “Mm-mm-mm!”

He wasn't wrong. Domino's for the win. Besides, it was one of the few takeout joints that promised the food was still hot upon delivery. Ordering a burger and fries from somewhere just made you disappointed. Then you sat there with your cold, limp fries.

"I don't think you understand what a treat this is," Camden said. "Daddy hates takeout. August, that is. It's usually something Anthony and I sneak around with."

I chuckled and bit into my slice of cheesy goodness.

Halfway through lunch, someone showed up with a carrier—one of those used for cats and small dogs—and the woman was definitely here for Penelope. Because she rushed over to greet the woman with a bright smile.

Then Penelope bent down to peer into the carrier. "Oh, he's adorable, Sierra. Nora, get over here, please."

Yes, Ma'am!

I wiped my fingers and scurried over there.

"You'll have to make sure I bought all the right things," Penelope told Sierra. "I almost gave myself a headache trying to figure out what litter was the best."

Sierra chuckled. "I'm sure it's fine, Ma'am. Mistress wrote you a helpful list too, and I brought food for a week, plus a baby blanket that smells of home."

Penelope extended her hand to me, and I was happy to thread our fingers together.

"Nora, I want you to meet Sierra. She and her Mistress have helped me find the perfect early birthday present for Ash. Sierra, this is Nora, a hotheaded obsession of mine."

Hotheaded obsession, huh?

I wanted that on a business card. Hotheaded Obsession of Mistress Penelope.

“The obsession is mutual, and it’s nice to meet you, Sierra.” I reached out and shook her hand.

“You too, Nora.”

It was my turn to peer down into the carrier, and my heart about jumped with the adorableness. Oh my gosh, the kitten was so cute! And tiny! Gray and stripey, with a white belly. Blue eyes.

“Oh, I want one.” I pouted. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy,” Sierra confirmed. “He turns ten weeks today, actually.”

I sighed and straightened up. “One day... One day, I want a house with a big backyard and all the animals.”

I caught Penelope’s curious expression in the corner of my eye, and she could file away that little tidbit of Future Nora.

Some ten minutes before Ash was due, I had ants in my pants!

I hadn’t left the floor of Penelope’s cabin since we’d let little Paws loose. It was the name I’d chosen for the wild sprite, but I could pretend to be understanding if Ash wanted to change it.

“At the same time, he needs to realize it’s the perfect name,” I said matter-of-factly.

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Penelope laughed as she finished setting the table. “Would you say kittens trump lizards?”

Oh. Hmm. “I’d say they don’t really compare. I can’t cuddle with a lizard the way I can with a kitten.” Not that Paws was in a cuddle mood either. He was currently rolling himself over my leg while I leaned back against the couch. “Lane and Ty have invited me down to their place in Florida, and if all goes well, maybe I’ll bring a Mistress, and we can chase lizards and snakes together.”

She didn’t even hesitate with her answer. “I’m afraid your future Mistress will leave the reptile-chasing to her girl because the Mistress prefers furry animals.”

Unbridled excitement tore through me, and I lifted Paws off my leg before I rose to my feet and hurried over to her.

“You said future Mistress!”

She smiled and pulled me in close, right where I wanted to be. “Did I?”

“You totally did.” I snaked my arms around her neck and brushed our noses together. “My hopes are high, just so you know.”

I understood why she was careful. And maybe I was okay with her cautiousness because she wasn’t difficult to read anymore. Her eyes seemed brighter, and she wasn’t holding back as much.

She didn’t say anything now either, and she didn’t have to. She leaned in and kissed

me instead, holding me tightly, speaking with her actions. She wanted to hope, and that was enough for now.

I deepened the kiss, tasting her on my tongue, and I eased my fingers up into her soft waves.

She always smelled so damn amazing, like some kind of flowers—never too sweet, more fresh and just...perfect.

She slowed down the kiss and squeezed my butt through my shorts, until she took a breath and rested our foreheads together.

I cupped her face in my hands and ghosted my thumbs over her freckled skin.

“I wanted to ask you something earlier.” She averted her gaze to my shoulder and slipped her hands beneath the waistband of my shorts. “In that house with the big backyard and all the animals, are there kids too?”

Welp.

It wasn't a shock, at the same time as it was. Dating women who were older than me had taught me a thing or two, and this question tended to come up earlier.

“I don't know,” I answered honestly. “I don't want to claim I'm too young to have made up my mind, but I'm not in any camp yet, so to speak. I can say I'm not ready right now, all while sometimes saying stuff like, when I have kids... Kinda like that.”

The corner of her mouth turned up a fraction. “Good answer.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded and met my gaze again. “I was the same when I was your age. Then—nothing. Ella didn’t want children, and the notion wasn’t high up on my list either. But...being almost forty and starting fresh...” She winced. “I admit, I don’t want the door to be firmly shut.”

My stomach tightened with nerves in the best fucking way, because things were suddenly real. Maybe she didn’t dare hold out a lot of hope yet, but she was definitely gearing up for it. Otherwise, she’d never bring this up.

“It’s far from shut.” I kissed her again and mirrored her smile—

Goddammit! Two loud knocks on the door let us know dinner was here. And Ash.

“We’ll talk more later.” She gave me a quick smooch before she went to open the door.

I blew out a breath and instinctively sought out Paws so he wouldn’t escape.

Penelope opened the door. “Nora, can you grab my wallet? I gotta tip the delivery man.”

“You’re funny. You’re so funny that I can’t stop laughing.” Ash strode in, seemingly always wearing his work clothes, and dropped a kiss to the top of Penelope’s head. “Interestin’ venue change for dinner, by the way.” He nodded at me and smirked lazily. “Daughter.”

I gigglesnorted. “Hey, Dad.”

“Uhhh...” Penelope lifted her brows.

So I had to explain. “I texted him the other night at, like, eleven...? And he was like,

go to bed, kid, it's late.”

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“So she called me Dad and told me to mind my own bedtime,” Ash finished.

Damn right!

“Well, all right, then,” Penelope said, closing the door. “Mildly disturbing I’m dating your child, but...”

Ash set the takeout bag on the table. “Oh good, so it’s official. I was waiting for you to pull your head outta your ass.”

“Is that how you speak to your daughter-in-law?” Penelope challenged.

Ash stood straighter and cocked a brow. “Is that how you speak to your father-in-law?”

“This is fun.” I grinned. But also, I was hungry for Chinese food, so I took my seat at the table and waited for their little staredown to end. “Are you gonna eat or what? And how much do I owe you, Sir?”

That seemed to break the playful pissing contest, and Ash huffed and sat down across from me. “Owe me for what?”

“Uh, the food?”

He looked at me like I’d grown a second head.

“She’s young, Ash,” was Penelope’s explanation. “They’re always Venmoing each

other for something.”

Ash nodded once as he dug out a bunch of containers. “I’m not unfamiliar with it. I Venmo my kids money all the fuckin’ time. Gas this, makeup that—oh, but all my friends are getting it, Daddy! Why can’t I?” His mimicking what I presumed was his daughter’s voice was hysterical.

I figured it was best to stay silent. He seemed to be in a ranty mood.

“Worst is when they ask for somethin’ and haven’t done their chores yet, and I gotta reason with the little fuckers,” he muttered. “Have kids. Don’t have teenagers. I’m half kidding. I love my babies. Even when they’re terrors.”

Penelope laughed and went behind me, and I realized she was picking up Paws. Ash hadn’t noticed the rascal.

“Maybe the kids will do their chores if they can play with your birthday present afterward?” she suggested.

“Huh?” Ash stopped unpacking his chopsticks and looked up.

I beamed as Penelope brought the little kitten over to him.

“I know it’s early, but happy forty-sixth, friend. Nora named him Paws.”

“Which you can obviously change,” I added quickly. “If you insist.”

A dozen different emotions flitted past in Ash’s expression, from confusion and disbelief to wonder and however I would categorize “look how fucking cute that thing is.”

Then he exhaled a laugh and accepted the kitten. “Get outta town. Are you serious?”

“Of course.” Penelope touched his scruffy cheek, and we kind of lost Ash for a moment.

“Look at you...” He nuzzled Paws’s face and seemed immediately smitten. “You comin’ home with me, little guy? Huh? Fuckin’ hell, he’s cute. Yeah, you are.” Not to mention lively. Paws was all paws and curiosity. “I bet those baby teeth hurt like hell.”

I cleared my throat and scooped some rice onto my plate. “And the claws...” I had some scratches on my arm already.

“That’s okay. I like ’em feisty,” Ash murmured.

Penelope and I smiled at each other. Safe to say, she’d scored a home run with that present.

“I’ve taken care of all the kitty accessories too,” she added. “He has a litter box, some toys, food...oh, and I got a carrier.”

“You’re goddamn amazin’, sweetheart.” Ash leaned over and kissed Penelope’s cheek. “Thank you.” He returned his attention to Paws and smiled. “And you’re not allowed to leave me. That’s not how this works. No, you gotta love me forever.”

Yikes.

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Someone should text Nathan...

It took Ash a while to refocus, but when we were almost done eating, he managed to set Paws down on the floor.

Paws was keeping his name, Ash had announced, but his kids might pick a middle name.

I was very okay with that.

As I munched on just one more eggroll, Ash pulled out a tiny notepad from one of the side pockets in his pants, followed by a short pencil I hadn't even seen he'd kept behind his ear.

"Before we begin," he said, grabbing a fried shrimp, "is Penelope joining as your Owner, girlfriend, or both?"

Ummm...

I glanced at Penelope.

She smirked a little. "I'm a protective observer trying to get to know her girl better. I'm here to gather information."

Oof, I really liked that answer. Every now and then, she served me with a reminder that she was a Predator, and I couldn't wait to play with that side of her.

“Copy that,” Ash replied. “So, since the last time we spoke, they’ve announced the names on the four stations at the event. Serve Your Owner, Suffer for Your Owner, Treat Your Owner, and Pose for Your Owner.” He’d written them down on his pad, and he circled the second one. “We haven’t discussed pain. Frankly, I thought it was gonna be straight-up servitude, but given that Reese and Pen are two of the organizers, I shoulda seen the sadism comin’.”

Penelope grinned wickedly.

Hot.

Ash turned to her. “I don’t suppose you’ll give us more than that? From previous years’ experience, you’d’ve sent out additional information for the Tops by now.”

She straightened in her seat and cleared her throat. “Not this time. The focus is on how well you know your partner—and with that in mind, with less info, it’s safe to assume the pain play won’t be advanced.”

“Fair enough.” Ash nodded with a dip of his chin and shifted his gaze to me. “You’ve already told me you have no issues safewording, so we’ll?—”

“With the exception that she gets apologetic,” Penelope stated.

Nuh-uh!

Ash furrowed his brow. “Why would you get apologetic—and was this at the event last week? I heard Colt mention you safeworded but everythin’ worked out. I forgot to ask you about it.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” I insisted. “I can understand why I’d come off as apologetic because I kept saying I was sorry, but I was more bummed out for cutting the scene

short. I was having fun—I didn't want it to be over. So it wasn't like I felt bad for messing up or anything like that. And I didn't hesitate to call red either. I felt the rope tighten around me when I slipped down the wall, and the moment I started panicking, I safeworded."

"Rope..." Ash bobbed his head and scratched his eyebrow. "You were with Nathan?"

Shit. I nodded once.

So did he, and he cleared his throat and doodled another circle on his notepad. "I can deal with you slinging out you're sorry like a Canadian, as long as you don't hesitate for a second to safeword at any time. Standard color-system for safewords applies at events, and if you're unable to speak, you will either have a safeword ball that you squeeze, or I'll be close enough that you can pinch me. I don't care how many times you do it, if you pinch, I'll treat it as red."

That worked great for me. "I solemnly swear to safeword without a moment's hesitation," I promised. "Also, I'm a little curious about where you draw the line before it's advanced pain play. Like, harder beatings...?" I grinned.

Penelope chuckled. "It's more about being able to anticipate it. Primal play, for instance, is advanced play because it's driven by fear. When a Predator hunts you down, you don't always see the next strike coming. What we're saying about the level of pain for the Game is that you won't be blindsided. If the pain becomes too much, you'll be able to call yellow or red without shock running through your system."

Ah, made sense. It was reassuring too. "Okay, got it. Plenty of room to react. But just so we're clear, I love both fear-laden pain and receiving it for the sake of releasing pressure within me, so I doubt it's an area I'll safeword. I can take a lot of it too."

“Shit goes wrong all the time, hon—that’s all,” Ash explained patiently. “No matter how high your tolerance is, dozens of factors can cause somethin’ to go sideways. So I need you to keep that in mind.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. As for your reactions to receiving pain,” he went on. “Are you a screamer, a bratty little shit who’ll curse me out, do you get euphoric, do you moan, gasp, get excited...? Tell me what I can expect from your sounds and body language. Oh, and—” He faced Penelope. “With the protective observer’s permission, I’d like to give her a beating before the event so I can pick up cues easier.”

Uh-oh!

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Penelope's sadistic little smirk said it all. "I have time right now. Why don't we torture her together in the club?"

Ash turned wolfish, and both looked at me.

Gulp.

CHAPTER FIVE

Penelope Darling

Ash circled the X-cross and inspected Nora's body. "She wasn't exaggeratin' when she said she loved pain."

No kidding.

We'd learned that she was a teeth-gritter. At least so far. No crying, no screaming, no gasping. She gritted her teeth and breathed heavily through each impact. She had only panties and a sports bra covering her, and I was officially obsessed with watching the marks appear on her perfect body. Her toned stomach, her soft thighs, the gorgeous curves of her hips, her arms...all flushed, all red with welts, all exquisite.

I picked up a new whip, this one a cat-o'-nine tails with tiny stainless-steel balls at the ends, and I noticed we'd garnered a bit of an audience in the club area. River and Reese both sat at the bar, eating their dinner and watching, and Shay was blindfolded and kneeling by River's feet. Standing a little closer to the small demo stage were Beau, Walker, and Santiago.

I turned away from them again, and I watched Ash go through his inspection. He was really good with her, and I was looking forward to seeing them at the event. He pinched her flesh in different places to gauge her sensitivity level because, as we all knew...at some point, you stopped registering pain. But Nora was highly alert, highly sensitive, and she squirmed when he hit the jackpot around her thighs.

“Ow.” She sucked in a couple quick breaths and screwed her eyes shut.

God, I wanted to see the moment she broke.

“Green? Yellow?” Ash asked.

“Green,” she gritted out.

“All right—let’s proceed.” Ash checked her restraints and then returned to my side, and I stepped forward and eyed the soft flesh of her stomach.

How her muscles contracted with each heaving breath was fucking mesmerizing.

With the distance closed between us, I ran the ball-tipped ends of the whip over her skin, and she tensed up before exhaling shakily. I knew the metal would feel cold to her heated-up flesh.

I leaned in and kissed her jaw. “I will break you, baby girl.”

Her eyes flashed open, and the burning desperation seared into me. I had to kiss her. I kissed her hard, with all the promise I was dying to give her. Fuck, she was bringing me back to life, this girl.

I eased back and gave her cheek a light smack, and then I got in position while she caught her breath and squeezed her eyes shut once more.

After that...I let the pain rain down on her.

In complete silence, I was lulled into my own rhythm, reminding me of how much I needed this place. It wasn't the parties or the big events; it was this right here. A few friends watching because they shared similar interests. A beautiful girl being beaten, taking my pain, suffering for me—wanting me. Only me. And fuck if I wasn't falling into her trap, hook, line, and sinker.

The day I got to chase her down in a proper primal event, I might keel over. Or fucking propose.

The heavy leather strands whipped through the air before the tips smattered across her skin, and a light sheen of sweat had started dampening her face. She wasn't far away from tears now. Over and over, I whipped her stomach, and she writhed fruitlessly against the shackles.

When I took a break to throw her off, she drew a raspy breath and blinked hard. Tears clung to her lashes, but so far, not a single one had trickled down her cheeks.

I went over to my toy bag and dug out a blindfold.

Deep breaths.

Her breaths came out more rapid and shallow for every minute that went by, and I was sure I saw a flash of both determination and surrender in her eyes before I blindfolded her. Christ, to be in her head now...? To watch the battle unfold—give in or fight, give in or fight, scream or suck it up a while longer.

Time for a new toy.

I settled on a small switch that Walker had made me once. The ten-or-so-inch-long

strands of the implement were harder, leather woven with wire, ends knotted, producing the stingiest of sting-y pain.

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Ash extended a half-full water bottle and kept his voice down. “Throw it on her.”

Good idea. It should provide a nice shock to her flushed body.

With a tight grip on the switch, I got ready and approached her a final time. Because this was gonna do it—I was so sure. I knew just how, too.

In a swift movement, I squeezed the bottle and threw the water over her face and upper body, and the second she gasped, I flicked the switch with as much force as my wrist could pack. The strands slapped against the underside of her left arm, and I didn’t stop. I went for every sensitive area, from her underarms and stomach to the insides of her thighs and her feet.

Her mouth was open in a silent scream, and then it finally came. A piercing yet hoarse, choked-out scream that racked her body.

I continued.

She screamed.

I shifted the impact to her tits, right across her nipples, and the scream morphed into sobbing.

There we go, sweetheart.

Waterdrops rolled down her abused flesh, as did tears down her face.

I drew a deep breath, power and control surging within me.

“Give me your color, Nora,” I ordered.

“G-greeeeen!” she wailed brokenly. “God-fucking-dammit, det gör så j-jävla ont!”

In English, please?

“You fucking Sadist!” she sobbed.

That’s better.

I grinned, out of breath, and peered back at Ash.

He nodded once, satisfied.

We’d gotten our answers.

The whole experience was so fucking elating that I hadn’t even begun to process what I was feeling. I was riding a strange high, and it was time to come back down from it.

While Ash did away with the implements we’d used, I focused solely on Nora.

I removed the blindfold first.

“You did so well, baby.” I kissed her tear-streaked cheek and eased my hands along her arms, a silent way of preparing her for the restraints to come off. One by one, I undid the shackles, and her arms fell heavily.

I gathered them around my neck, and Ash was quick to release her ankles.

Nora whimpered and cried, her body trembling against mine, and I decided to change our plans. Aftercare in the cabin would have to come after a shower upstairs.

“Can you meet us back at the cabin?” I asked Ash. “I’m gonna take her upstairs first.”

“Yeah, of course.” He dipped down and pressed a quick kiss to Nora’s temple. “I’ll see you soon, kiddo. You in the mood for cocoa or Coke?”

I wasn’t surprised one bit to discover he’d already quizzed her about aftercare preferences.

“Coke, please,” she cried.

“I’ll get shit sorted. She’ll need some extra energy too,” Ash said.

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I nodded, and then we parted ways.

She didn't have much strength at the moment, so I activated the wheelchair lift on the stairs and held her close to me the whole way up.

"Such a good girl." I pressed kisses to the side of her head and gently rubbed her arms. "Tell me what you need the most right now."

She sniffled and wiped fruitlessly at her cheeks. "I don't know. I-I can't stop crying."

"Let it all out. You don't have to decide anything—but if you think or something, you'll let me know?"

She nodded.

"Good. In the meantime, I'll take over," I murmured, ushering her off the lift and into the nearest shower room. "We're gonna take a nice, lukewarm shower, and you tell me when we get to the perfect temperature."

"Yes, Ma'am," she whimpered. "On the cold side, please."

I'd figured. Those welts had to feel like a blaze of fire by now.

After stripping her down, I guided her to one of the showers. We had no stalls here, just one shower after another on both sides. All white tile.

I held the showerhead away from her until the water was a cold-ish lukewarm, and

then I held out her hand.

“Wanna try this first?” I asked.

She answered silently by stepping closer, so I slowly moved the gush of water over her body, and she shivered violently.

“Too cold?”

She shook her head. “N-no, it feels good.” Even so, she was trembling quite a bit, so I’d be careful. “That was so sadistic with the water you splashed on me.”

I smiled and winced simultaneously. “I had a feeling it would do the trick, but I can’t take credit. I think Ash wanted to see how you responded to shock.”

“Credit or blame?” she grumbled.

I laughed softly and hugged her to me, effectively soaking my top and my shorts.

She was a competitive girl. She’d received the shock at a good time, in my opinion. It was possible her stubbornness wasn’t always her friend. If someone pushed themselves too far, they invited more risks.

Ash had undoubtedly drawn the same conclusion.

Reaching for one of the two soap dispensers nearest us, I made sure to pick the one for sensitive skin. It was literally made for babies with diaper rashes, and Tate and the other masos swore by it. There were no suds. Just a gentle cream with a cooling agent.

“Is it a habit of yours to prove to yourself how much pain you can take?” I murmured.

She hesitated before she shook her head. “It used to be, but not anymore.” Her blue eyes flashed with uncertainty. “I swear it’s not. I was about to reach my limit anyway. Limit for what made me cry, I mean. The pain wasn’t too much.”

I nodded and carefully rubbed some soap over her arms where I brushed my fingertips over so many welts. Thin and thick, barely there and definitely there.

Complete trust would settle over us like a comforting blanket with time, but I did trust her to safeword and be 100% honest in a scene.

Moments later, we were back in my cabin, and I had her cuddled up in my arms on the couch, dressed in a skimpy pajama set, while she sipped on Coke and ate ice cream.

Her skin smelled like my body butter.

Ash sat on the other side of the coffee table, and he was making notes in his notepad. He had Paws on his lap too, and the little thing was finally tired.

“In that case—what Penelope said—as long as you don’t try to prove anythin’, I’ll trust you to speak your mind on Saturday,” he said, jotting down a few more things. “So, you’ll grab my hand if you wish to say somethin’, and I’ll be the benevolent Master King Owner that I am.”

I grinned, and Nora giggled.

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“Do you not identify as a Master normally, Sir?” she wondered. “You seem to know a lot about this high-protocol stuff.”

“Years of observing,” he answered. “I don’t really have a title beyond Sir.”

“He’s total Daddy material,” I felt the need to say. But given his and Nathan’s history, neither of them had found a good way to experience the best of both worlds. They’d had casual play together with others, and that didn’t always result in hearing a specific title.

I was the same way. Mistress was a title that would come down the road, once Nora and I were fully established.

“Yeah, you definitely strike me as a primal Daddy,” Nora noted.

Ash smirked faintly but said nothing. He kept writing things down.

It wasn’t his favorite subject.

“Okay, I think that’s it—no, wait. Touching. We gotta cover that as well,” he said. “What level of touching are you comfortable with durin’ the Game?”

Nora shrugged and scrunched her nose. “It’s gonna be nonsexual for both of us, so I’m not fussed. Do whatever the event requires, or...however I should put it.”

We understood what she meant, and it was a reasonable boundary.

“There won’t be any requirements for anything intimate,” I said. “One exception might be if bondage is involved. To create a harness for a girl, you kinda need to go near her breasts.”

“Breasts scare me less than bondage,” Ash joked. His forehead creased, and he glanced my way. “Will there be ropework? My version of restraints is using my hands or shackles.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t say. I pretended to zip my mouth shut and throw away the key. But he had nothing to worry about. Rope would be a feature one could pick. It wasn’t mandatory.

“You’re real helpful,” he deadpanned.

I blew him a kiss.

“But what about you, Sir?” Nora asked. “Are you comfortable with everything we’ve agreed on?”

“Absolutely.” He nodded with a dip of his chin. “Honestly, I’m just lookin’ forward to getting back to kink. It’s gonna be fun. Despite the theme.”

I chuckled. “I’m sure we’ll do a primal event soon enough. Too many of us are into that.”

“True.” He pocketed his notepad and finished his coffee. “Maybe this will take the edge off, at least. I have two neighbors drivin’ me batshit with ideas, and...” He shook his head.

Wait, what?

“What neighbors?” I asked. “You haven’t told me anything about any neighbors.”

“I haven’t told anyone.” He shrugged. “It’s a married couple—and they’re kinky. Submissive Daddy-type, switchy Little. What’s worse, the Daddy works for me.”

Whoa. Nora and I exchanged a look of surprise.

“Uh, we’re gonna need you to spill the beans,” I stated.

Nora nodded.

Ash chuckled. “Ain’t much to spill. This guy—James. My brother and I hired him last winter, and I was bitching about my apartment one day. He said the house next to the one he lives in with his husband was on the market. Turned out it was perfect for a big family, so I bought it. Then I started pickin’ up cues from them. I watched them interact, and I put two and two together.” He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. “Shit was fine till a few weeks ago—right before the cruise...? We took a day off work, all of us, like we sometimes do. Team building, but in a way that doesn’t make you wanna shoot someone in the face. We played golf and basketball, we went to a nice steakhouse, and we spent the night at some spa hotel where they had a sauna and everything.”

“Oooh, things can happen in saunas,” Nora teased.

I smiled, though it left me with a pinch of unease. Ash was big on loyalty, so I assumed this couple was looking for a third rather than one of them going behind the back of the other.

Ash lifted his brows. “That fucker certainly tried, but he was awkward about it. Nothin’ happened, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

Did he, though?

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As much as I hoped he and Nathan would find their way back to each other, I felt the need to point something out.

“You’re single, honey.”

He shook his head and rose to his feet with Paws in his grasp. “You know I’m not. I’ve tried, but...”

I understood. Being technically single didn’t mean things felt that way.

“Just putting this out there,” Nora said, sitting forward. “You and Nathan—two Doms. Your neighbors, a sub and a switch...? Can we do the math?”

“And that’s the fuckin’ idea I don’t need in my head,” Ash told her. “I gotta get home. You text me if your mood tanks, understood? You’re obligated to tell Penelope everything, but I gotta know too.”

She nodded and smashed her lips together. It was clear she wanted to press the issue, but it wasn’t wise. I knew firsthand how he could withdraw from a situation if shit got too personal.

“I understand, Sir,” she replied.

“I’ll keep an eye on her.” I didn’t want him to feel like he was bailing. The beating hadn’t been part of our original plan, and he was needed at home. But Nora wasn’t alone, and Ash had already gone above and beyond to make the Game a fun experience for Nora.

Friday flew by in a whirl of event preparations and processing my developing feelings. Part of me thought it was going too fast, but then I looked around the property and saw all the friends who'd found new partners this year. They hadn't hesitated to run with it.

I opened up to some of them about it too, and I could always count on Colt to spread his wings of wisdom.

"Hon, you're trained to spot red flags. If she ain't raisin' any, fuckin' go. That's what Luke and I did with Kit. Some call it a gut feelin', some call it chemistry—but you feel when it's right."

It did feel awfully right with Nora.

It was like I could breathe for the first time in I didn't know how many years.

River's advice was as brief as it was solid—as usual.

"Fuck it. No risk, no reward."

There was one more friend I wanted to talk to, though, and I caught up to him as he was heading down to his cabin.

For some reason, Greer was on his own today—or maybe his partners were arriving later. Greer had shown up in his utility kilt, which explained the catcalls from the pool. Every year, it was like this. When he came here straight from work—in the warmer months—he wore a kilt, and it never got old with the brats.

"At long last, kilt season is here!" Tate applauded.

"Keep it up!" Greer hollered back toward the pool. "Check out my calf game too!"

“Woo-woo! Where do I stick the singles?” Noa yelled.

I snorted in amusement and skipped onto his little porch. “Hi, friend.”

“Hey, shortcake.” He unlocked the door and nodded in What’s up.

“Quick question,” I said. “When you reunited with Archie, you pretty much went for it right away. Within a few days, you were trying out a TPE dynamic that included him staying at your place. Did you ever feel like it was going too fast?”

He grinned, part confused. “Me, thinkin’ somethin’ was goin’ too fast? That’s funny. I’m the family bulldozer, Pen. You know that.”

Fair point, but still.

“This about you and Nora?” he asked.

I sighed. “Yes.”

“And you think it’s goin’ too fast?” He headed inside and motioned for me to follow.

“I have an annoying voice in the back of my head telling me it’s too fast,” I admitted.

“I’m not exactly agreeing with that, but it’s hard to ignore.”

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He grunted and shrugged out of his work tee, tossing it on the couch. Archie had really fixed this place up. Before he'd entered the picture, Greer had used books as furniture. Countless stacks of books. Now, they'd put up shelves along the slanted walls, and Archie had added his Downton Abbey touches, Corey's love for frogs, and Sloan's artwork. It was a mismatched mess, but it worked.

"I have a few years on you, but I reckon this still applies to you," he said, giving his armpits a whiff. I scrunched my nose. "We're not twenty anymore. It's one thing to be mindful, but I don't have time to be cautious. That voice bitchin' at you is probably the part of you that's jaded. Trust, I had that voice too."

That did make sense.

He walked into his little bathroom, where he looked like a giant. He soaked a towel, presumably to wash up.

"And you told that voice to pipe down," I guessed.

"With a swift kick to the nuts," he confirmed. "Take it from me, hon. I spent years mopin' and grumbling to myself, but when push comes to shove—I don't wanna live with regrets. I'd rather have my heart stomped on, as long as I gave it a go."

All the lovesick idjits were saying the same damn thing.

And they were right. Not an ounce of me wanted to slow things down with Nora. Hell, the opposite. I wanted to ask her to spend more time with me out here. I could drive her to work in the mornings, and then we could stay in my cabin while I sorted

out my vanilla life. I had work lined up. I just had to find a new home.

A house with a big backyard, maybe...

Once Greer was done, he applied deodorant and came back out. He grabbed a clean tee from a bag on the kitchen table.

“Are your other three coming out later?” I asked.

“Just Archie today,” he replied. “Sloan’s kids are hoppin’ on a flight tomorrow to go see their mom in Chicago, so he and Corey are staying back to spend the evening with them.”

“The kids are flying on their own?” If I wasn’t mistaken, the two youngest were under four.

“No, their mom’s parents are takin’ them, thank fuck. Ever since she started her job in Chicago, it’s clear her priorities have shifted.” He was visibly annoyed by that. Couldn’t blame him. “To be honest, I’m not sure she’s comin’ back. It’s supposed to be for one year, but...” He shrugged and dug out a pair of jeans next. The kilt-loving brats would be so sad. “Fuck it, I’d rather have the kids with us full time. They’re finally happy again.”

I smiled. I knew how much those children meant to Greer.

“Speaking of kids, I heard Reese talking about a few new cabins out front, where members can bring their kids,” I said.

He nodded with a dip of his chin. “Aye, he asked me about it. It’s a good idea as long as we make sure the kids don’t stumble upon anything they shouldn’t see.” He scratched his jaw. “We talked about an age limit too. Kids older than three shouldn’t

be here. You never know where they might run off to.”

That was true. Greer and Archie had brought their daughter a couple times, but she was just a year old, and they kept her in here where things couldn’t be more vanilla. If Archie wasn’t with her, Greer was. Or Corey or Sloan, of course.

“Three is a good limit.” I nodded. And the front of our property was so large. We usually compared it to a football field, and we didn’t use it one bit. But plant some bushes, transplant some trees, build a picket fence around a new area, and we could create a kid-safe zone in there. We already had a group online for kinksters with children; they met up for their own munches in the city from time to time.

It gave me butterflies to think I might be one of those one day. I honestly wasn’t sure if it was what I wanted, but now I had the choice, and it meant a lot.

“Pen, I know that stupid smile,” Greer chuckled.

“What?” I composed myself and scrubbed a hand over my mouth. Fuck.

He grinned. “Nothin’. It’s just good to see.”

I huffed.

Saturday morning, I didn’t get much time with Nora either. We were in full-on Game mode, and all participating members had been banned from the backyard. No pool fun for them. Instead, they were using the shitty little grill on the front porch to make lunch—and they were sending the brats to run through the sprinklers.

I heard bets were being made...

Because so many dynamics had signed up for the event, we’d had to ask for more

volunteers, and Reese was now going to run his mascot competition as a sidetrack station so that the groups weren't too large.

For several hours, it was me, Reese, Jack, August, and our volunteers, Santiago, Franklin, Lucas, Beau, Ivy—who couldn't do anything strenuous—Gretchen, and Sierra running around to set everything up.

We cleared the deck of all outdoor furniture, because that would be Jack's station. Left behind were the two hot tubs and a long table that Gretchen and I began filling with coolers. It was too warm to leave the food out for hours.

Said coolers were packed with all kinds of food, from fruit and vegetables to bread and toppings, from pastries and cookies to beef jerky and chips. Plus beverages—which reminded me, I had to prepare a thermos or seven. Most Tops loved their coffee.

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Meanwhile, Reese's station would be out on the lawn, beyond the pool. He and Franklin were setting up kinky furniture where slaves would prove they could suffer for their Owners.

August and I were sharing the club area. He had one half reserved for the bake-off, and I had the stage area dedicated to ceremonial poses. Poses with a twist. Jack, ever the humiliator, had put his creativity to work.

The poses were meant to look hysterical—at least some of them—but the sub wasn't allowed to laugh.

"Can someone help me grab the antique-looking chairs from the supply room next to the dojo?" Jack called, jumping up onto the deck.

"Sure thing." Santiago and Lucas trailed after him.

"Here are the silver trays, Ma'am." Ivy came out from the club with a stack of trays.

"Thank you, pet." I met her halfway and accepted them. "Go have a seat for a moment."

"I just rested!" she protested.

"I wasn't asking," I sang. "Do you want me to call your Owners?"

She retracted her claws damn quick.

Attagirl.

But now I kinda wanted to see my own hothead. It was bizarre, wasn't it? We'd had breakfast together three hours ago, and I already missed her. Every now and then, I heard her laughter from the other side of the house, and I just wanted to run to her.

CHAPTER SIX

Nora Lilja

"I can do this, I can do this, I can do this," I chanted, doing my best to shake off all the excess energy. "I can be a slave, I can be obedient...and all that crap."

I'd never seen the front lawn so packed with people before. I estimated some sixty, maybe seventy people had shown up. I knew twenty-two couples were participating, and then the rest were here to enjoy the show.

Everyone had shown up in the last hour. Before then, we'd been a chill group of Sadists and brats. Now, the serious people were here. Many Masters and Mistresses were dressed up, acting like it was a dog show. Some of them had their slaves in leashes.

Whatever floated their boats!

I snuck closer to Ty and Lane. Like me, they didn't feel like they fit in. They glanced at some of the guests like they were aliens.

I'd changed into a short, spaghetti-strap dress; that was as close to slavery clothing I'd go. Many others had, like...loincloths and little scraps of fabric.

"Jag är lite nervös." I told Lane I was a little nervous.

He smiled, confused, and asked why. “Hvorfor?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I wanna make a good impression. Penelope likes this stuff.” Thankfully, only now and then, not as a twenty-four-seven thing. And I kinda loved it too, but I didn’t have much experience with TPE.

“You’ll be fine,” Ty said, folding his arms over his chest. “Colt was gossipin’ earlier about how hooked Penelope is on you, so...”

Oh. Yeah, I beamed like the freaking sun.

And then a whole lot of amusement trickled in, because Colt was coming up behind Ty, still a few feet away, but there was a chance he’d heard Ty.

“I thought Sadists didn’t gossip,” Lane teased. “It’s what all of you keep saying. Brats gossip, and Sadists merely inform one another.”

Ty smirked to himself and scratched his eyebrow. “There’s an exception for fighter pilots, darlin’. Damn gossip queens. But to be fair, there isn’t much else for them to do while the rest of us work on their multimillion-dollar toys.”

I spluttered and laughed, and I slapped a hand over my mouth. That, Colt had definitely heard. He cocked a brow and swiftly made his presence known by throwing an arm around Ty’s shoulder, almost in a headlock-kind of way.

“What was that, buddy?” Colt asked. “Did I hear an Air Force engineer run his mouth again? Why don’t you document it? ’Cause that’s all you fuckin’ do.”

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Ty rumbled a laugh and playfully punched Colt in the side. “Don’t even try. My list of pilot jokes is far longer than anythin’ you can come up with about engineers.”

“Like I said, y’all document everythin’. I keep my shit up here.” He tapped his temple. Then he turned to me and Lane. “Here’s a sayin’ for ya. A jet is flight ready when the engineers have made so many doodles that the weight of the documentation exceeds the weight of the jet.”

“Doodles?” Ty retorted incredulously. “I’ll show you fuckin’ doodles!”

And they were off...

It was like high school here sometimes.

Lane and I shook our heads at the children.

“Jag är inte nervös längre om man säger så,” I said dryly, telling him I was no longer nervous.

Lane laughed.

“Nora!” I heard Ash shout.

I spun around, trying to spot him. I’d been waiting for him to get here! There. He emerged between two groups of serious people, and I was so relieved to see he’d shown up in jeans and a tee. No uptight clothes for us.

I jogged over to him. “Hi!”

“Hey, you. Sorry I’m late.” He draped an arm around me and ushered me toward the porch steps. They’d be opening the doors any moment now. “My youngest called and asked why she can’t eat nail polish to see if it tastes pretty, so that turned into a whole thing. I had to Google the damn ingredients and explain toxicity.”

I gigglesnorted. “That’d be Lily, then?” I’d heard some cute stories about her. Ash and Nathan suspected she might be on the autism spectrum, and Ash had mentioned her when Franklin was nearby. Which had prompted a whole conversation because Franklin and Jack’s daughter was also named Lily—and she was autistic.

Now, they had plans to go golfing together.

“The very one.” Ash nodded with a dip of his chin.

As if on cue, the big doors opened, revealing Reese and Penelope with stone-faced expressions and fancy clothes. Goodness! Penelope in a pencil skirt and a snug button-down...? Sign me up for a teacher fantasy. Or a librarian fantasy. Or anything, really.

“Finally. We’ve been waitin’ forever,” Ash told them.

“Oh my gosh, it’s starting!” someone called from the crowd.

“We’re right on time, fucker.” Reese flashed his watch. “See? Four o’clock.”

Ash came up to him. “Is this like the guards watchin’ the palace in England? Do I get points for making you smile?”

I cleared my throat and tapped his shoulder. “You don’t get points for that in

England, but you might get arrested, depending on how far you go.”

Penelope’s lips twitched, and she turned away.

I grinned.

“Enough joking around,” Reese said. “We’re not here to have fun. That’s not what TPE is about.”

Lucian came up behind us with Cam, and they furrowed their brows.

“Pardon?” Lucian asked. “Our core kink is not fun?”

“I said what I said, man,” Reese grated out. “Come on, quit wastin’ time.”

When I spotted Macklin coming up the steps with his Owner, we exchanged a brief glance, and he nodded subtly.

It was on!

Anticipation buzzed within me, and I followed Ash inside the house. Considering we’d been banned from being in here up till now, many had bags and clothes to store away; I’d stashed my shorts and top in the bed of Penelope’s truck. I’d left my phone there too, safely tucked under a folded tarp.

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Eventually, everyone gathered in the club area, and I perked up at the sight of the setup in the seating area. The chairs and sofas and tables had been pushed closer to the wall, and two long tables with white cloths now occupied the space. And with it came a chef. August King was dressed like the chef he was, and he'd prepared stuff on the table, all of which was hidden underneath those silver lids you lifted off a plate at a nice hotel.

The doors leading to the deck were closed, and Jack and Lucas stood there as guards, so I assumed we weren't allowed to be out there.

The cacophony of voices grew louder as the club area filled up, and Reese yelled over the din for everyone to gather at the stage.

My contribution to the brat reveal was done; I'd helped out with the audio, but I saw some others getting ready to finish their part. Tate accepted Macklin's phone and went behind the bar, to the confused look on Kingsley's face. Noa and Corey whispered to each other, and I could tell they'd hidden something under their T-shirts. Most of the other male participants went shirtless.

Last but not least...

I watched with a dumb grin on my face as Macklin left Walker's side and strode up on the stage.

Gah! This was going to be so fun! And also, I had front-row seats to watch Ash's reaction.

“Boy, what do you think you’re doin’ up there?” Reese demanded. He was instantly on high alert, and I could imagine why.

“Get that brat off the stage!” Colt hollered.

“Now what?” Ash folded his arms over his chest.

Macklin switched on the mic and tested the sound. “Testing, testing. Do we have any scared Sadists in the house?”

“Motherfucker,” Greer cursed somewhere behind me. “He picks today?”

My cheeks hurt from smiling, and I wanted to catch all their reactions. River with his scowl, Reese with his death stare, Colt and Greer with their readiness to get even, and all the brats beaming with excitement.

I found Penelope in the crowd, only to see she was already watching me with a playful warning in her stare.

I blew her a kiss.

“Before the event starts, I would like to take a quick moment to show my appreciation,” Macklin said. The crowd piped down one by one, and Macklin paced casually along the length of the demo stage. “As one of the founding members of Mclean House, I’ve had the privilege of practically growing up with some of you. I remember when I came out here for the first time, just legal enough to buy my own drinks. This was long before Colt grew a mustache.” Laughter all around. “Reese and Lucas showed me around the house, and they spoke of the plans they had. Founders’ cabins, guest rooms, playrooms, interrogation rooms, this club right here... A lot has changed over the years. For instance, do you know what color the house used to be?”

“Do you know what’s happening here?” At the sound of Ash’s voice, I glanced up at him, and he could not look more suspicious.

I cranked up my sweet innocence. “No clue whatsoever, Sir.”

He snorted, not believing me for shit, and looked back at the stage.

“Every now and then, I like to take a trip down memory lane to remind myself of how far we’ve come,” Macklin went on with a smile. “And of course, some things never change. Like—” He chuckled and shook his head. “A few years ago, for instance. I don’t remember if it was after an event, or we were just doing a chill barbecue, but I do recall we had quite the crowd out on the deck.”

Oh, here it comes, here it comes, here it comes!

“Reese and Ash, in particular, were in a great mood,” he added. “They’d had a few.”

Reese and Ash exchanged a look, and Greer leaned forward to speak for only Ash to hear.

“Innocent till proven guilty. Deny, deny, deny, my friend.”

Ash nodded once and stood straighter.

I smirked.

Macklin sought out Reese and Ash in the crowd and spoke to them. “Do you remember, Sirs? How you stood out there and soapboxed your asses off? You said things like, don’t worry about brats. They get distracted by everything and can barely string a coherent sentence together.”

“Whoa!” Noa got huffy.

“The nerve...” Corey chimed in.

“And you said no brat in the universe was bright enough to outsmart you,” Macklin chuckled. “Do you remember?”

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Reese shrugged and shook his head. “Doesn’t sound like us.”

Ash agreed. “You’re makin’ shit up. Rule number one, don’t underestimate your enemy.”

Macklin grinned. “I’m glad you said that, Sir. Welcome to the stage, Kit and Lane.”

I covered my mouth with my hand and struggled to stand still. The two guys entered the club, wheeling in a very old TV.

“Part of going down memory lane is obviously to go through old home movies,” Macklin said. “Took me a while to find this in one of the supply closets, but I just had to track down one that still took DVDs.”

Yeah, talk about ancient.

“I bet he’s never heard of VHS,” Greer muttered.

Lane plugged in the TV, and they had everything cued up.

“I’ll admit, I’ve been saving this particular video,” Macklin said. “After your grand speech, I thought, this will come in handy one day. I forgot about it, life went on, until one day just a couple months ago—you went on another brat rant, Reese.”

River turned to his brother. “You can just never shut up, can you?”

Snickers and chuckles traveled through the crowd once the video started playing.

Right then and there, with Ash and Reese standing on the deck outside, going on and on about how clueless brats were.

“Am I right or what?” Reese boomed out in the video. “I swear, I’ll streak naked through DC if a brat ever outsmarts me.”

“Count me in!” Ash held up a beer bottle. “Ain’t never gonna happen!”

And every damn Sadist in the video cheered. Colt, Greer, KC, Kingsley... Lucian chuckled in the background, and even River. River didn’t say anything, but you could tell he was in agreement with the other Sadists. They goaded the brats around them, though I could only recognize a few of them. Macklin and Tate were there, as were Ivy and Gretchen. Scowling, shaking their heads...

“Get to the fuckin’ point,” Reese ordered impatiently. “You haven’t outsmarted us.”

“Haven’t we?” Macklin didn’t miss a beat. “Tate?”

“Right away,” Tate said. He had the audio cued up on Macklin’s phone.

“The rest of you can be the judges,” Macklin told everyone. His humor faded, and a hint of his dominance rose to the surface. “But in my eyes, it looks like we successfully fucked with their heads. For weeks.”

What followed was sheer magic. All the recordings we’d saved up. All of us. Tate, Macklin, Kit, Noa, Corey, Lane, Ivy, me... We’d bided our time, and we’d caught the Sadists unaware. At home, at a party, at events, during the cruise—one of us had been ready to capture their speculations, and we’d edited all the snippets to sort of overlap.

“...and do you have anything else? It’s gonna happen soon.”

“No idea. I don’t even know if Tate is involved.”

“What do we have so far? Who’s in on it?”

“...does anyone know...”

“...any chance have good news to share on the brat prank?”

“Those li’l shits can be crafty sometimes. Kit’s upped his game lately...”

“...possibly Tate. We’re not sure about him.”

“Oh, Ivy’s definitely involved.”

“What the fuck are they up to? I can’t figure it out.”

“...we usually have to suffer the most...”

“This is drivin’ me batshit!”

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“Keep your voice down—he might hear.”

“Any more clues?”

“...we think it’s gonna be here...”

The moment the audio stopped, you could hear a pin drop in the club.

We totally got them!

We weren’t stupid. We knew very well that Reese and Ash—and all the other Sadists, for that matter—loved to rile brats up. What they’d said in the video was them fucking with brats. It wasn’t what they actually believed. But either way, now they had to own their claims.

Ash scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed heavily.

Reese scratched his eyebrow and tried to look unfazed. For once, he was failing.

“Don’t worry, Sirs,” Macklin said into the mic. “We won’t make you streak naked through DC. We propose a compromise.”

“Fuck my life,” Ash chuckled. “All right—give it to us.”

“Seriously, dude,” Reese snapped. “You’re surrenderin’ that easy?”

“The longer we drag this out, the more they’re gonna enjoy it,” Ash pointed out.

He wasn't wrong.

Noa and Corey stopped holding back their laughter, and they scurried up on the stage.

"We ordered two gorgeous summer accessories for you," Macklin continued. "Until the end of August, we want you to wear these when you're around the pool. And any brat who comes up to you is allowed to Sharpie a message on the fabric."

"Good Christ." Ash smacked a hand over his face.

Oh, they were so beautiful! Two pairs of white swim trunks with tiny red hearts all over. Plenty of space to leave messages, which we'd already done. To get them started, so to speak. Who knew how much would remain after a few dips in the pool—hence why we were allowed to add messages.

Right now, the trunks were filled with "THE BRATS WON," "I WAS OUTSMARTED BY A BRAT," "BRATS RULE," and "SADISTS SUUUUCK."

"What do you say, gentlemen?" Macklin asked. "Do you accept our compromise?"

A low murmur erupted among the members, several muttering about the damn brats, some admitting we'd earned our win, and Colt saying, "Revenge will be sweet."

Ash was the first to suck it up and head toward the stage.

River nudged his brother. "Just fuckin' accept they won this round."

In the end, a grumpy Reese accepted his punishment too, and he and Ash met with Macklin on the stage to applause and a new summer outfit.

I clapped and whistled sharply. "You'll look adorable, Sirs!"

Corey snatched the microphone from Macklin. “Also, a round of applause for Macklin, the mastermind who orchestrated this whole thing—but many of us were proud to assist!”

“Go brats!”

“Good job!”

“Nailed it!”

“Go Macklin!”

It was the most exhilarating feeling, which only grew stronger when the Sadists conceded. I watched them all, Colt, Walker, Kingsley—they applauded and admitted they’d been defeated. This round. They were very clear about the last part. This round. Greer, Ty, KC, I could go on. They were surrendering. We’d won this prank.

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I beamed with pride and could only imagine what those who'd been around for longer felt. I mean, I knew all about the constant banter going on, and I had my fair share of experience from my old community. But every now and then, the brats brought the trophy home, and it was fucking glorious.

Reese was back in higher spirits within seconds, and he grabbed Macklin in a headlock, kissed the side of his head, and said something in his ear. Whatever it was made Macklin blush and smirk at the same time, and he nodded in response.

Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end, and when Reese grabbed the mic, that end was nigh.

“Well, my station at this event just became better,” he said. “If everyone can simmer down, we'll get this show on the road. Welcome to Slave Mode.”

Penelope and Jack joined Reese on the stage, and Ash returned to me.

With a pair of trunks in his grasp.

I grinned at him.

He shook his head in amusement. “Fuckin’ brats.”

Yes, Sir!

Penelope was the next one to speak into the mic. “As promised from last month’s Game, the Easter Egg Hunt, we have three winners to announce too. You’ll find the

scores posted on the website later tonight, but in the meantime, give it up for Shay, who finished in third place, Noa, who placed second, and Kit, who came in first!”

“Woo-hoo! Congratulations!” I cheered.

Kit looked stunned and flushed adorably at everyone clapping, and he immediately plastered himself to a proud Daddy Colt.

So cute.

“Let’s see who wins at being a good slave today, shall we?” Penelope handed the mic over to Jack.

I can be a slave, I can be a slave!

Maybe.

Jack cleared his throat. “Our dungeon monitors will hand out information about your groups and some event rules as we do a roll call.”

Santiago came up to Reese with a clipboard, and they started crossing people off, half to themselves, though we still heard them.

“Let’s see, I saw Lucian and Cam already, then Walker and Bratlin, Colt with Kit...” Reese went down the list. “River and Shay, Ash and Nora... Are Ty and Lane here?”

“Yes, Sir!” Lane called out.

Reese continued. “I saw OG August and Ev, and Dean and Gael are over there... KC, Noa, Anthony, Camden, Greer and Archie...”

I zoned out when Lucas handed Ash a piece of paper, and he showed it to me. So in our group, it was Ash and me, Greer and Archie, KC and Noa, Kingsley and Tate, and Anthony and Camden. A good mix of TPE peeps and fun-loving brats.

Ash tapped his finger over one of the rules. “We already covered this.”

Yes. The rule was that slaves weren’t allowed to speak; if they had something to say, aside from safewording, they needed to ask for permission by signaling to their Top. And Ash and I had agreed I was going to grab his hand.

“Please take a moment to read the terms properly,” Penelope ordered.

Another rule, all slaves must walk behind their Owners.

Doable.

I was fairly certain I knew how to fake it till I made it. TPE could be so damn beautiful to watch, and I’d done a lot of watching.

I wanted Penelope to be proud of me.

After a long safety lecture, the organizers gave us absolutely nothing on what we could expect. They didn’t want us to know before we arrived at the stations, so we still only knew the themes of the four stations. Pose for Your Owner, Suffer for Your Owner, Serve Your Owner, and Treat Your Owner.

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“With that said,” Reese went on. “We have a fifth, separate station that will be unattended. Partly because so many signed up—which we’re happy about—partly to ensure we have enough staff at each station, and partly to have a spot to send everyone if we feel a certain station gets too crowded. If that happens, we might send a group to the fifth station more than once.”

Penelope leaned forward and asked what had to be a scripted question. “And what’s this fifth station about?”

“I’m so glad you asked,” Reese chuckled. “We are announcing an official mascot competition. Each and every one of you will be encouraged to illustrate a mascot for our community, and the four judges will pick out our top ten. Afterward, those ten contributions will be photographed and posted online, where the entire community can vote.” He paused briefly while brats like Corey and Kit whooped their excitement. “We won’t tell you how or what to draw, but I will say that the judges will choose according to these following guidelines. The mascot needs to represent the whole community. It can’t be too vulgar. If you write Team House Mclean on it, it’ll get disqualified?—”

“Booo!”

“Boo!”

“Lame!”

“This is pure censorship!”

Reese just smirked. “Lastly, make sure you write your online username next to the illustration.”

Well, I wasn’t sure I was gonna enjoy that so much. At best, I could draw a stick figure with a flogger.

“The mascot thing won’t be part of the Game, right?” I asked Ash. “I won’t be able to score us squat with my stick figures.”

He laughed through his nose. “Nah, it’s just a side thing.”

Phew. Bad enough I had to be judged on grace, obedience, and...whatever else they’d mentioned. Something like how well I knew my Owner. Oh, and performance.

Dammit, I was nervous again!

“The event begins in five minutes,” Jack stated. “That’s when we start registering every infraction we see, and that’s when you need to be present at your first station. Good luck, everyone.”

I chewed on my lip as Ash and I scanned the piece of paper again. Our first station was Treat Your Owner, which was located behind us. We’d go there twice during the event, and given that August King was decked out in chef’s clothes, it was safe to assume we’d cook something. Or bake? Maybe?

The people around us started moving, and Owners were slinging reminders to their slaves.

“You ready, li’l cub?”

I took a deep breath. “Fuck yeah, Big Bear.”

“Then let’s do this. Activate slave mode.” He freaking booped me on the nose, like it was some button.

I cracked up and shoved at him.

He was very pleased with his joke.

But then it was go-time, and I took another deep breath and got serious. Ash took the lead, and I walked behind him as instructed.

We joined up with Greer and Archie, and Kingsley and Tate weren’t far behind. Lastly, two Daddies who couldn’t predict how things would go with their Littles, Camden and Noa.

“I’m prepared for anything,” KC said.

“Same here,” Anthony chuckled.

August smiled from the other side of the long tables. “Welcome to your first station. I’m Chef King, and your slave’s task is very simple. Each slave lifts one lid, reads the recipe, and creates a dough. They have ten minutes.”

Oh my gosh. Okay. Okay. Ten minutes. To bake something—got it. I could do that.

I noticed he wasn’t speaking to us, just our Owners. I supposed that was part of it.

Camden snuck out from behind Anthony and waved at August. “Hi, Daddy,” he whispered.

I stifled my grin. Good thing we hadn’t started yet!

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Chef King humored his boy with a kind smile. “Hello, little one. You’ll be a good boy for Daddy now, yes?”

“The best in the galaxy!” Camden promised.

“Too fuckin’ precious,” Ash chuckled quietly.

Just a beat later, Jack announced that the event had started, and it did something to me. I automatically straightened and made sure my posture was good, and I lowered my gaze to the floor.

“There we have it, slaves,” Chef King said. “Come forward and begin. Ten minutes on the clock—now.”

Nu jävlar.

I rounded Ash and went for the nearest spot in front of us, and I lifted the lid. Okay, okay, got it. Flour, softened butter, sugar, vanilla extract, one egg, salt, baking powder... I suspected we’d be making those American sugar cookies. My dad loved them, with way too much icing. Plus, I spotted a cookie cutter, so yeah.

I grabbed the recipe, and sure enough—sugar cookies.

“My cookie cutter is an airplane, Daddy!” Noa said happily. “Oh crap.”

Mine was the shape of a T-shirt, and I was not announcing that.

Dammit, Archie was already mixing ingredients. In the right order too. He knew what he was doing. Honestly, I loved to bake, but my strength was in cooking.

Chef King and one of his helpers—Franklin—handed out baking sheets as we worked.

“When the dough is ready, you roll it out and use the cookie cutters,” Chef King said. “We’ll write your names on each sheet, and we’ll store them in the fridges until it’s time to bake them. And by the time you return for your second visit, you will decorate them for your Owners. If you understand, say, yes, Chef King.”

“Yes, Chef King,” we replied in unison.

“Music to my ears,” Greer murmured.