

play. kiss. dominate. laugh.
sing. tease. touch. open. feel.
breathe. sigh. gasp. moan. vow.
deny. give. think. cry. crave.
do. sob. beg. hold. lie. speak.
consume. pull. submit. caress.
close. pray. **control.** shudder.
weep. tend. soak. revel. fight.
swing. groan. tell. sway. hum.
surrender. stand. ease. offer.
push. carry. take. be. spread.
promise. revel. accept. soothe.



Songs of Submission
Book Four **CD** **Reiss**

Control

by

CD Reiss

Songs of Submission – Book Four

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This is Book Four.

If you haven't read the first three books, your best bet is the omni edition, [available here](#).

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CHAPTER 1 .

MONICA

“Get on your knees.”

Even through the phone, I could tell Jonathan was using his dominant voice. I got nervous that I would dampen the expensive panties so badly the protective paper at the crotch would curl and peel off. “Yes, sir.”

Facing the dressing room mirror, I got to my knees. The black garter and stocking

I was trying on looked as though it had been taped on me. The black satin belt slung low on my hips held the straps that dropped down my thighs with silver rings.

“How does it look?” he asked.

“I think you’ll like it.”

“How does it make you feel?”

“You really want to know?” I asked.

“I’m sitting in the back of my car, thinking about you. It’s wall-to-

wall traffic. So, yes, I want to know how it makes you feel.”

I heard women outside the dressing room door. Their soft conversations and laughter were muffled by the clothing draped around the room, lingerie with bows and clasps and metal rings set into lush satins and elastics. Every piece I'd tried on aroused me, and when he called, the addition of his voice to the mix brought me near tears.

“How do I feel?”

I asked. The carpet dug into my knees, and I was goose bumped from the air conditioner, but that wasn't what he meant. The black satin bra's cups were made of two panels that could be moved for access. It felt so comfortable, I didn't even know I had it on. The curves of the underwear accentuated the length of my pelvis. “I feel like fucking.”

I heard him take a breath. I did enjoy

shocking him. “Tuck the phone under your left ear.”

“Done.”

“Done?”

“Done, sir.”

“Put your left hand on the mirror,” he said. “Lean on it.”

“Yes, sir.” My hand spread on the mirror like a starfish. It would leave a mark.

“Put your right hand between your legs.”

“Jonathan...”

“Do it.”

My cunt clenched

with anticipation. I stroked lightly through the string of cloth, sucking air between my teeth from the tingle of the touch.

“Get under the fabric,” he said, as if he could see I hadn’t put my fingers on my skin.

“Yes, sir.” The word *sir* seemed to vibrate not just outward, to him, but inward, down a thick nerve connecting my vocal cords to my core. When I slipped my fingers under the panties,

I shuddered.

“You wet?”

“So fucking wet,”

I whispered.

“Your legs
spread?”

“Yes.”

“Look at yourself
in the mirror.”

I did, and I was greeted by a face slack with arousal, flushed with sex. “Yes, sir.” I watched myself submit to him, in that outfit, as if I needed to be more turned on. Outside the door, I heard a throat clear.

“How do you look?” he asked.

“I look like I can’t stay in here much longer without someone coming.”

“You got that right,” he mumbled. Papers shuffled on his side. He was working while telling me to finger myself. A true multitasker. “Stroke your clit and all the way down to that beautiful hole.” I groaned, my cheek caressing the phone. “Keep going. Work your

clit. Go around it twice,
then over the top.”

I did, and the
heavenliness came as
much from my own touch
as the knowledge I
obeyed him. “Oh,
Jonathan.”

“Put two fingers
in.”

My pussy
clenched around my
fingers, kissing them,
sucking them in. The heel
of my hand found my clit
as I pushed my fingers in
and out.

He whispered,

“Tomorrow night, when I see you, I’m going to put my fingers in you and lick you until you beg me to stop. Then I’m going to squeeze your clit with my lips until you come again.”

“I want you.”

“You will have me.”

“May I come?”

There was a distinct possibility he’d say no, and I was so far gone, holding off my orgasm would hurt. “Please let me come.” His silence

tormented me. “Please, sir.” I smiled a little. I never thought I’d actually want to call a lover *sir*. But it felt good, and right, and fun.

I heard his smile as he said, “You may.”

I pressed my whole hand along my wet cleft, feeling everything from the tingle around my pussy to the powerful ache at my clit, back and forth, slowly. My breathing got hard and short. I had to keep it down. If I could hear

myself, someone else could as well. I closed my eyes and buckled. My hand left the mirror as my back arched, encompassing me in heat from my knees to my waist. I bit my lip to keep from crying out. My hips pumped as pleasure washed over me in impossibly long waves. The phone dropped to the carpet.

CHAPTER 2 .

JONATHAN

I heard the phone hit the floor, and her groans fill the room. I looked out the window onto the parking lot otherwise known as the 710 freeway and imagined her touching herself. I imagined her expression, her smell as she writhed on the floor enough to drop the phone, all while wearing some elastic and satin configuration. A shiver went down my spine. I

felt connected to her when I commanded and she obeyed. It was as close to touching her as I could get.

“Jonathan?” she whispered.

“How are you feeling?”

“I want to curl up next to you and go to sleep.”

“Have I told you how amazing you are? You please the hell out of me.”

She didn't answer right away. My little

goddess of Echo Park must have been smiling. “Wait until you see the underpants I just made a mess of. They’re gonna please you plenty.”

“Buy everything.”

The next pause wasn’t as pleasant. “I want to talk about this.”

“We can talk tomorrow. I’ll pick you up at five.”

“Are we going to lie in bed and watch the Dodgers lose game six?”

“You’re not supposed to ask a man

where he's taking you.” She grumbled. My goddess was a big baseball fan. She probably thought I hadn't noticed or had forgotten.

After she'd left the previous morning, when I drifted off to sleep with her humming and stroking my hair, I leaned back in my office chair, looking out the window and thinking of her. Hours later, I called her and asked her on a date.

“A real date?”

she'd asked. "Like dinner or a movie or something?"

"I know a nice place. We'll have some wine. Good food. You know, like people do." I'd looked out over the Hollywood Hills. I had to see her again. I had an ache for her that phone calls and texts wouldn't satisfy. It started the minute she left and had grown to uncontrollable levels in the hours since.

"Well, that's fine and all," she'd said, "but

just so you know, I don't fuck on the first date."

I'd been laughing when my assistant came in. I indicated she should sit and took the schedule she offered me. "I need you to get something to wear," I said into the phone.

"Oh, not again."

"Again and again. I'm in a meeting." I looked over my schedule for the next day. "Can I text you?"

"You're avoiding my refusal."

“I won’t be late. So be ready. *Dressed* and ready.”

“Thanks for the clarification.”

“You’re welcome.”

I’d tossed the phone aside, glanced at my schedule, and glanced at Kristin. “I have a meeting with my ex-wife at six thirty?”

“You said to take any meeting she wanted.”

“I did. Cancel the meeting and cancel the standing order. She goes

on the schedule like everyone else.” Kristin shook her foot and nodded, her body a barrel of emotional tells. She was so transparent, I had no idea how she’d gotten through Vassar without those bitches eating her alive. “Yes?”

“Are you making your lunch with Eddie tomorrow, or do you want to meet Gerald Deritts from Council 12? He called and had an opening on the mixed-use ordinance.”

“Cancel Eddie.”

“Sheila’s stuck on the 405. She’s added this to the agenda.” She’d handed me a folder.

“Ah, our trust,” I’d murmured as I flipped through it. When we got engaged, I set up a trust for Jessica that provided for everything she needed. Though she had taste and social standing, she couldn’t manage a dollar. When we divorced, I’d intended to revoke her benefits, but never had. I’d been such

a pussy. I'd told myself she hadn't taken a dime from me because I needed to believe it. The withdrawals didn't hurt me, but she'd continued to take money from the trust, and I owned the building her studio was in and didn't charge her rent. There were other incidentals I'd probably forgotten. "Tell Sheila I want to review all my financial entanglements with my ex-wife. Book that for next week."

Kristen had

pursed her lips. I could have asked her what was on her mind, but it wasn't worth a conversation. Her crush was cute when I'd hired her, but it was getting less so. I'd said no, I didn't want to sleep with her. Further conversation about that, or why I wouldn't bend over backward to see Jessica anymore, would be unproductive.

After dismissing Kristin, I'd tried to get back to work, but my thoughts were consumed

with Monica. In anticipation of our date the next day, I opened an account at Bordelle for her. When I texted her the info, she shot back...

—*An account?*
For all the girls?—

—*Just opened it.*
Go. For me.—

The next day, she called me from the dressing room to thank me, and I couldn't help it. I had to have her, and I did. She got on her knees when I told her to. She slipped easily into play

and out again, becoming her witty, intelligent self seamlessly. She wasn't intimidated by me. She teased and challenged me. She kissed like she meant it, and from the very first night, she enjoyed fucking without reservation or shame.

Monica was, in a word, perfect.

CHAPTER 3.

MONICA

I was bag laden as I walked to the café. Jonathan had called Bordelle and told them to wrap up everything I'd put in the dressing room. So I went to Nordstrom's and got my own goddamn dress. I hoped he liked it because it set me back two weeks' tips, a lot of money for something that would end up draped over the chair on his porch. But I needed to feel right with myself. I

accepted him as a dominant in bed, and that worked out very well for us. In the outside world, I was my own woman.

Except for the eight hundred dollars in lingerie.

I rushed to the entrance of Terra Café. Yvonne sat at a patio table with her fourteen-month-old, scooping ice cream out of a cup.

“Girl,” she said as we hugged, “where the hell have you been shopping? And what’s

with the shoes?”

I tipped my foot to make the red sole visible. I wore the shoes I'd gotten at Barney's more often than I should, but letting them sit at the bottom of my closet seemed a crime. Yvonne looked at me sidelong while she scooped ice cream. Her afro was teased to four times the size of her head, her eyes lined with gold, and her lips painted the exact chocolate color of her skin. She was simply

gorgeous.

“You like them?”

I asked.

“I know what they cost, so I know where you got them. So whether or not I like them depends.”

I sat down and ordered a green tea and a chocolaty cake thing. Aaron, in his striped shirt and overalls, sat with his mouth open. Vanilla ice cream dripped out of the corners of his mouth like he was a dairy vampire.

“I’m sorry about

your friend,” she said.
“Were you close?”

“She was like a sister to me.” I felt a little hitch in my throat, a sob pushing up from my gut. I swallowed it. I didn’t cry in public. In private, the past few days had been a rush of tears and beaten-back sorrow. “Anyway. It’s fine. I’m dealing with it. Still haven’t cleared out her room. But anyway... how’s school? It’s your last year, right?”

“Tryna get my thesis accepted. Thinking

about doing gender
instead of race.
Something with women's
bodies and politics.”

“Sexual
intersections.” My tea
came.

“Oh, that's good.”
She scraped the bottom
of the cup. “Now, I didn't
ask you to lunch to talk
about UCLA.”

“The weather,
then?”

“My boss? Your
former boss? The hot
motherfucker? Six two?
Medium build? Reddish

brown up top... and down below?”

“Not in front of the baby.”

“I hear he’s a freak.” I spit my tea. “Well,” she continued, “word gets around. So...” She slithered in her chair. “What. The. Fuck?”

“Yvonne, really. Totally inappropriate.” I looked at her over my cup, wishing for a quick and painless death. I’d known she wanted to ask me about Jonathan, but I

didn't know she was aware of his proclivities.

“He’s really private about who he’s...” She stopped herself. “... who he’s spending time with. But we all saw your picture from the L.A. Mod show in the paper. And it was no secret at your friend’s wake.”

“I don’t know what you’d call us at this point,” I answered. Aaron made a long *aaaaaahhh* sound of pure delight. He kicked under

the table and the silverware bounced. “He’s cute, this baby. You made him?”

“Me and that creep. Can’t deny he’s a good-looking creep.”

“Is he still stalking you?”

“Cops had to come last week. He put a camera at my bedroom window to watch me sleeping. Isn’t that sweet? Oh, and he got my bank account information ‘to put Aaron’s child support right in there’ to

save me the trouble of going to the bank. I said, man, I hope narcissistic personality disorder isn't genetic."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I called you so you could help me with a little escapism, and so far you're a big fail."

I knew she'd ask, and I had prepared boundaries, but she immediately broke them down by revealing the freak rumor. The thing was, I wanted to tell her.

I had no one to talk to. Darren didn't want to hear it. Gabby was dead. Debbie and Jonathan were friends. I knew some of my girlfriends better than Yvonne, but none of them had asked about the handsome man at my side at Gabby's wake. They'd raised eyebrows and introduced themselves. I got phone calls, roundabout questions, and invites to parties and gatherings. I refused everyone but Yvonne, probably

because she was very up front about demanding information.

“We’re having sex,” I said. “Tomorrow night, we have a date, which we haven’t done yet.”

She put a board book in front of Aaron and leaned toward me, folding her long, skinny arms. “You’re *having sex*? Who are you, grandma? Come on. I hear he’s into whips and chains.”

I pressed my lips

between my teeth. I would have to deal with the rumors at some point. “I’ve never seen him hold or use a whip or a chain. Nor have I observed either one of those things in his house or his bedroom. However...” I let my voice trail off and sipped my tea, leading Yvonne along. “I won’t deny there may be some truth to those rumors.”

“Girl,” she said with no little excitement.

I shrugged,

wanting to play it off, but Yvonne had come to dish. She wasn't leaving with generalizations and vague admissions. "How is it?" she asked.

"It's incredible."

"Tell me." Her whisper was hoarse with anticipation.

"I can't," I whispered back. "It's not cinematic. It's not exciting unless you're in it. He speaks to me. He tells me what I want before I know it and before I can deny myself."

I'm free with him, but not in the way you think." I turned my teacup around in the saucer.

I stopped. I could have said more. I could have told her he dominated me, and I submitted by letting go of everything I expected of myself. I ceded all control, all emotion, all physical boundaries, and in doing so, I found sexual honesty. I felt closer to him than I felt to anyone else because he saw parts of me I didn't.

The quivering, weak, fearful parts that I denied existed, he brought out and caressed. Thinking about his demands made me want him again. I crossed my legs, convinced Yvonne wouldn't understand.

Her expression told me I was right. Her face was still, disentangled from the drama surrounding my adventures with a rich man. She wasn't exactly concerned as much as apprehensive. "So

where's it going?
Serious? Steady thing?
Just sex?"

"I don't know."

"How do you feel
about it?"

She was
definitely not getting an
honest answer to that.
"Taking it slow. I like
being around him. I'm
trying to not get too
attached, but I don't
know if staying detached
is working."

Aaron fussed, and
Yvonne pulled him out of
his chair. He rested his

head on her shoulder.
“You buy yourself the shoes and underpants?” she asked.

“Of course not. The shoes alone...” I pursed my lips. I didn’t like where she was going, and I didn’t have the heart to slap her the way I’d slapped Darren.

“I’m gonna ask you something because I like you. You can get your panties in a twist if you want, but you shouldn’t.”

“I may not

answer.”

“He abusing
you?”

“No!” I cried.
“God, Yvonne, what part
of what I said makes you
think *abuse*?”

My reaction was
offense, not for myself,
but for Jonathan. She
didn’t know him. She
didn’t know us together.

But I couldn’t
hold her to my level of
loyalty. The twisting web
of rage in my chest
surprised me, though.
Was the rage caused by

her implication that Jonathan was an abuser? Or because I'd just found out he had a reputation?

Yvonne, who couldn't see my neurons pulsing like machine gun fire, continued, "Kink is often a disguise for abuse and exploitation. I know it's not that way yet. But if you get uncomfortable, will you call me?"

"No." Not only was I not calling her, I wasn't calling anyone. What Jonathan and I did, and how we did it, was

private. Having even one person know was making me very uncomfortable.

“Sure, you will. Look, I know how a nice guy can turn into an asshole on the turn of a dime, so all I’m saying is...” Her expression changed, as if what she wanted to say fell dead on her lips. She smiled instead. “I’m totally jealous. If he’s *not* abusing you, I might have faith in men again. That’s all.”

I exhaled a long,

lung-emptying breath, as if I'd been holding it. I'd been unfair and insensitive. Yvonne's history included a brother who fondled her and a boyfriend who locked her and their son in the house when he went to work. Of course she was attuned to possible abuse when I came along with bags of expensive clothing and a man who tied me up and spanked me for our pleasure. I pushed my cake toward her. "Eat, please. I have

to stay skinny if I want to
look good in this shit.”

CHAPTER 4 .

JONATHAN

Long Beach was the absolute last place I wanted to be. The sky was the color of a handful of quarters. Without the sun to warm the air, the wind off the ocean hit cold and hard.

I had to be quick. I had a meeting with the deputy mayor in Century City in two hours, and then I had a date. A real date, where I'd wear a suit and behave myself.

At the Port of

Long Beach, the *Faulkner Coalmine* was set to be cataloged, packed up, and sent to a warehouse in Europe, never to be seen again. I'd bought it the night of the Eclipse show. Eclipse shows only ran a week, so the minute the show closed down, my dealer, Hank, had a team in to collect it. Wainwright was surprised, but the check cleared nicely. He showed up at the closing to chat up my dealer,

trying to sell more work. Fucking hustler. Obvious how he got her into bed.

Lil pulled up to the warehouse. Hank strode out to meet me. He was six feet tall, early sixties, bald, and wearing a four-thousand-dollar suit. He could tell shit from chocolate, negotiate a deal, take up space at an auction, and determine true worth from hype. More importantly, he understood my taste, which was why he'd been so surprised I

wanted that piece.

“Jaydee.” He held out his hand. He had on a few big rings and a clunky watch, and his voice was thick with New York. He looked more like a truck driver than an art dealer, and that’s why I liked him. He snuck up on people with his knowledge and erudition, and by the time artists and agents realized they weren’t dealing with a rube, I had what I wanted.

“Hank.” We

walked through the warehouse. My companies used the space as a logistics hold for construction materials and imported food. The offices for the people routing it all over the world were inside the warehouse, too.

Hank waved his arm dismissively. “What the fuck did you buy this piece of shit for? You want something to spend your money on, I got a girl with a studio in Compton. Tears in your

eyes. Tears.”

“You called *me*.
And not to question my
taste, I presume.”

“I question your
taste every day.”

“Really? Never
would have guessed.”

Hank stopped
outside a conference
room door. “It’s good
work, no question. But I
don’t know how much of
it you saw before you
went overpaying while I
wasn’t looking.”

“Almost none.”

“Fan-freaking-

tastic. Can we not do that any more?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Fine,” Hank said, obviously annoyed. “Everything’s here. All the documentation, the sketches, inspiration, all the history and work that went into the installation. That’s what you bought, sight unseen.”

“Can we go in now?”

Hank remained in front of the door. “Look, artists are crazy. I never

met one who wasn't a little scrambled. Maybe they all got bit by a shithouse rat when they were babies. This? That I got behind this door? I'm thinking of calling the LAPD just so they can have a record of it. But I need your okay first."

"You've really intrigued the hell out of me, Hank."

He opened the door. The room was outfitted with a long table and black office chairs for impromptu meetings

with the logistics staff, importers, and customs officials. Every surface was covered with sketches and tiny, three-dimensional mockups. Some cutouts, some collages, some mounted, all numbered to match the catalog.

“I left the good shit on the table, under that black matte,” Hank said.

I moved the black cardboard. It was about the size of a placemat, but it hid something

bigger than its actual size.

The top sketch was a black quill pen spaghetti scrawl, and only by looking at it carefully could I discern a woman with her throat cut and a blood-spitting dick coming out. The woman had dark hair. I knew who it was.

Next in the stack: her face split open and a target inside.

A gun in her snatch. A dozen knives pinning her to the wall.

Hands choking her. Squeezing her breasts blue. Pulling her vagina out. It got worse. The things he fantasized about doing to her body were sickening.

“Is this actual blood?” I asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine. The catalog says ‘mixed media.’”

“Thank you for showing me this.”

Hank slipped the black cardboard over the drawings so the violence

didn't take up the whole room. "Should I shove it up his ass?"

"No. I want you to photograph it first. Then I'll tell you when to burn it."

"Do you know what this cost you?"

"Yes, I do."

He regarded me for a second. "You know the girl."

I held my hand out. "Thanks again, buddy. Make arrangements with your Compton girl if you think

it's a fit.”

“Will do.”

On the way back up the 710, I couldn't think straight, much less work. I'd never wanted to hurt anyone as badly as I wanted to hurt Kevin Wainwright just for putting those images in my head. But he'd done nothing wrong. The purpose of his work was to exorcise his demons. He couldn't be held legally or morally accountable for its content. If he was angry

at Monica for walking out on him, he had every right to draw her slashed open if that gave him closure.

So I couldn't call the LAPD, and I couldn't tell Monica. I'd have to admit I bought the thing behind her back, and she wouldn't think well of it. Worse, I could scare her for no reason. I didn't want to scare her. I wanted her to be the same, proud little goddess I knew. I was just going to have to

watch her more closely
in case they were more
than just drawings.

CHAPTER 5.

MONICA

I wore one of my new garters, a purple so dark it could be black. Over that was the black lace dress I'd bought at Nordstrom's. The skirt fell just above my knees and the satin lining stopped just above the hem. The neckline was modest, and the sleeves covered my upper arms. It was skin tight but comfortable and classy. He could take me anywhere. I was only a

slut underneath the dress.

I braided my hair. I tried to make it special, but I simply didn't have Gabby's skill, and my arms ached by the third try. I did my best, though, same as every day since she died. I wore my hair as a remembrance to her, as if I could call her back and whisper in her ear *I loved you*.

I didn't have a roommate to answer the knock at the door. Times like that made me feel gut-twisting loneliness. I

ran out, winding a band around the bottom of the braid. Even though I knew it was Jonathan, I had to look out the window to check first. He leaned on the corner of the porch, looking at the opening of the crawlspace. His brown leather jacket hung over a suit and tie, and his expression was dead serious.

“See something you like?” I asked when I opened the door.

“Your

foundation's slipping.”

“Have you noticed the hill? And gravity? How they conspire?”

He glanced back at me without moving his body. Fuck, he was gorgeous. “I can get someone to fix it. I’m a real estate developer, you know. I’ve got guys.”

I strode over to him and put my hands on his back. He looked at the foundation critically, as though he was doing calculations in his head.

He looked at me again, and I put my fingers in his hair. We stood like that for a second as I drank him in.

“You’re beautiful,” I said.

“I was just about to say that.” He turned and leaned on the railing with his legs spread. I stepped into the opening. He slid his fingers up my thighs, past my hemline, leaving my skin tingling in their wake. When he got to the lace tops of my stockings, he put his

hands beneath my ass and stroked me gently.

I leaned down until my nose touched his, gasping when he fondled between my legs lightly. “Jonathan,” I whispered, “what are you doing?”

“I just want to know what barriers I’m dealing with here.”

“You always stick your hand up a girl’s skirt on the first date?”

He caressed the insides of my thighs, keeping his touch soft. “I haven’t bothered with an

actual date for about nine years.” He angled his face so his lips met mine. I put my hands on his neck and kissed him. The tip of his tongue found mine, and we weaved our mouths together until I was a ball of heat and desire.

“I hate to break this up,” he said, “but we’re on a clock here.”

I groaned. I had no idea how I would make it through dinner.

“And you have to get a change of clothes,”

he said. “Jeans and a jacket.”

“Why?”

“Can you let a guy surprise you?” He slapped my ass and pointed to the front door. “Go.”

Still smiling from the delicious sting on my butt, I gathered up clothes, stuffed them into a bag, and ran back out to the porch. He'd parked the Jag in my driveway, right behind my little black Honda. He opened the passenger door for

me and closed it when I got in. As he drove up the 101, I put my hand on his, stroking the top of it.

“You working tomorrow?” he asked. “Because I have the day off.”

“Work, then Frontage.”

“Without your partner?” he asked, then waved his hand. “Sorry. Obviously.”

“Yeah. I wanted her on the piece with me and the boys, too. But, shit, I miss her.”

“What boys and what piece?”

“I’m collaborating with Darren and Kevin.”

The car swerved too far right, and he almost had an accident. A horn blared and a middle finger was raised. Jonathan waved in apology. “You were saying?” he asked.

“Don’t have an accident.” He pulled off at Los Feliz Boulevard. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“Small place in the hills.” He turned up into Griffith Park.

“You’re not just taking me to your house, are you?”

“No, not *just* my house. I have things planned, and they include my place. Initially.” He glanced over at me. “I didn’t suggest a date so I could take you back to my room and pin you to the bed.”

“Are we going to watch the game from your bed?”

“Nope.”

“Damn. Brad
Chance is pitching.”

“Why bother
watching? He’s going to
overuse his screwball
and wear out his elbow
by the third inning.”

“It’s fun watching
guys swing at them.
Especially Den Adler.
He practically falls
over,” I snickered.

“So,” he said
definitively, stopping at a
light, “you’ve avoided
this ‘piece’ thing for
exactly three minutes, and

I've been very good about it."

I put my hands on my knees. "Kevin asked me to collaborate on a thing with him for the B.C. Modern. We're on a tight deadline. I brought Kevin and Gabby in." The light changed to green, and I was relieved of the weight of his stare.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because they're family, and I like working with them."

"Not as a buffer between you and Kevin?"

“No.” I wasn’t sure if I lied to him or myself.

He pulled the car to a wide space on the side of the road and put it in park. He faced me. “Why did you agree to work with him after what he did at the Eclipse show?”

Layers of emotion masked his face. The top was a cold calm, an understanding bordering on parental. Under that, something wilder, but laser focused and

powerful, pushed to the surface. I took a nervous breath. He was pissed, and I'd never seen that before. Goose bumps rose over my arms, and I rubbed my thumbs against my forefingers. I wondered if he could hear the clatter of my heart.

“Having music at the B.C. Modern could make my career. Everyone will hear it. Everyone will review it. It was like being handed a gift, and if I'd refused, I

would have regretted it the rest of my life.”

“Your ambition outweighs your sense.”

I tried to match his anger with my own, but I felt puny and unjustified. “We were pretty clear that my work is my work. That hasn’t changed.” I kept my eyes level with his even though I felt the weight of his stare. He didn’t like Kevin. I knew that, but I wouldn’t abdicate my right to live my life as I pleased.

“Everything’s
changed, Monica.”

“Not that.”

With those few words, I felt two wills pressing against each other, hard, straight, still. Nothing moved. No friction was created between them. His hands clenched the wheel, and mine were wound into fists. I couldn’t bear it. I touched the top of his hand.

He grabbed the back of the neck and pulled my face to his,

drowning me in a kiss so hard and hot, I almost forgot what I'd seen in his expression. What had he seen in mine? That my heart could be broken? That I was falling in love with him, and if I tried to stop, the inertia would crack me in two? I pulled my face off his.

I said, "I know you don't like Kevin."

"Understatement of the year."

"He's harmless. And I'm trustworthy."

"The latter, I

believe. But men know other men.” He stroked my cheek. “Can you not be alone with him? Can you promise me that?”

It was a lot to ask. Darren was involved, but who knew what situations would arise? I covered his hand with mine. He needed me to make an honest effort. I could do that. “Yes.”

“Thank you.” He kissed me and got back onto Los Feliz Boulevard. We made the rest of the trip in hand-

holding silence.
Whatever anger had
manifested in his face got
pushed away. He pulled
into his driveway, and the
gate shut behind us with a
clang. He walked around
the car and opened my
door. I had never seen his
house in daylight, never
seen the art deco
woodwork on the
windows or the detailing
of the roof shingles. He
took my hand and led me
up to the porch. The front
door was open, and he
went in, expecting I'd

follow. But I stopped at the threshold.

“What?” he asked. “Cat got your feet?”

“I’ve never entered your house with my clothes on before.”

“Ah. Well, first time for everything.” He tugged on my hand until I crossed into his house. The living room was as it had always been but bathed in light from the setting sun. If the room could look warmer, more inviting, I didn’t know

how. He looked back at me and the sunlight dashed off the tips of his eyelashes as he pulled me through rooms and out to the backyard.

The pool was a huge, bean-shaped expanse in the center of the yard. Close to the house, a flower garden, sectioned by paths of flagstones, spanned from the main house to the pool house. Smaller, cozy areas with benches lined the right hedge, and on the left, wall-sized

sliding glass doors
opened into the sitting
room where I'd had tea.

Aling Mira
approached us in a
modest black suit,
carrying a tray of white
wine.

“Hi,” I said when
I took a glass. She
nodded and walked
toward a little table set
for two. A middle-aged
man lit the last candle on
one of the flagstone paths
and then the two on the
table. I told Jonathan,
“You have a nice yard.”

“Come walk with me.” He held out his arm, and I took it. We headed toward the pool on the candle-lined path. “Aling Mira cooked a Filipino specialty for you called kare-kare. It’s made from —”

“Oxtail stew?”

“You’ve had it?”

“I live in Los Angeles.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand. “She saw you slept in my room. So she’s very impressed with you.”

“How long has she worked for you?”

“A long, long time. She’s seen it all. She wants me to be happy as much as my own mother. Well, maybe an aunt or something.”

We strolled around the pool while the staff set up dinner. The sun was setting fast, and the candles lining all the pathways became more visible as the sky darkened.

“You lived here with your wife?”

“Yes. Why?”

“The bed?” I
cringed. “Was that...?”

He laughed.
“New bed, don’t worry.
You’re the only woman
I’ve had in it, actually.”

“I feel like a
groundbreaker.”

“You’ve broken
some ground on a few
things.”

“Such as?” I
swung to face him.

“This date?”

“And?”

“And showing
you off at the L.A. Mod.”

“And?”

“And taking care of you. And wanting to see you again and again. And dressing you for my eyes.”

“You’re making me feel very, very good.” I kissed him gently and breathed in that leather and sawdust smell that was his choice, not his ex-wife’s. “I have to talk about you dressing me.”

He put his arms around my waist and pulled me close. “Yes?”

“It makes me

uncomfortable when you buy me expensive stuff.”

He kissed my jaw and neck, as if to belie my discomfort and turn it into heat. “But the diamond was all right?”

I pursed my lips. “No, it wasn’t, but before I could think about it, stuff happened. So you got that one in under the wire. Don’t let it happen again.”

He put his lips to my ear and said, “I have a piano. A Steinway. Would you play it for me

after dinner?”

I kissed him and whispered, “I’d love to.”

“And you’d sing for me?”

“Yes.” I dragged my lips across his cheek, listening to him breathing and feeling his hands at my waist. The idea of making music for him was so intimate, so arousing, I didn’t think I’d be able to make it through dinner.

“When we met, you said you wouldn’t,” he said.

“Things
changed.”

“So, you’d take
this talent, gifted to you
from birth, and use it as
an expression of how you
feel about me?”

I pulled away.
“Aren’t you clever.”

“Money is a blunt
tool for expression. It’s
vulgar compared to art, I
agree, but it’s all I have. I
want you to accept it. It
would make me happy.”

I didn’t know
how to argue without
making the gifts he was

born with somehow coarse and ugly, while mine were worthwhile enough to give. He really had me cornered. “You just did a number on me,” I said.

He bowed. “Captain of the debate team at Loyola.”

“Ah, a good Jesuit education,” I said, walking away. “I suppose now I get to wear all my new underwear without guilt.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me back.

“You said you were Catholic, so you have guilt somewhere.”

“Only until eighth grade. I performed ‘Invictus’ for my graduation recital and earned my escape from parochial school. I entered Los Angeles Unified guilt-free.”

He took me in his arms and kissed me. “‘Invictus.’ Classic. We did that in sixth. Eighth grade was Kipling. ‘If.’”

“Oh, that’s a long one.”

“I had to recite it with *feeling*.”

I smiled. “Yes, me too. ‘*Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole* —’”

He completed the stanza. “‘*I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul.*’” He grabbed the base of my braid and pulled my hair as he drew his mouth to mine. He was so sweet. His kisses were hard and passionate, a controlled

lack of restraint in every flick of his tongue, every grasp of his fingers. I pushed into him, feeling his erection against me. He pulled away at the sound of a throat clearing.

Aling Mira stood behind me. “I’m sorry to interrupt. You said I should let you know when dinner is ready.”

“Thank you,” Jonathan said. He rattled something off in Tagalog. Aling Mira nodded to each of us and went back

to the middle-aged man who stood in a secluded area.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I thanked her and gave her the rest of the night off.” He put his hand on my back. “I’m perfectly capable of spooning you stew. And I’d like to.”

We strode slowly to a table set with silver and porcelain. On the side table was a full setting with stew in a silver serving bowl.

Aling Mira and the man went to a back gate.

“Who’s the guy?”

“Her husband, Danilo. They live in the back house.”

The metal gate clacked behind them, and we were alone in the yard. Jonathan pulled a chair out for me. I stood in front of it, between him and the table. I was ready to sit, but I wanted another kiss. I tilted my face to him, until I felt his breath on my face, and parted my lips.

He reached for me, and I thought he would put his arms around my waist. Instead, he met my lips with his and leaned into me. In one wave of his arm, he yanked the tablecloth, knocking the dishes off the table. They clattered everywhere, smashing and spinning. His weight continued forward, throwing more plates out from under me, until he pinned me to the table.

I opened my legs, wrapping them around

him as we kissed. My dress rode up to my waist. I pushed into him. His cock was so hard, like a tight fist against me. He groaned into my mouth, then pushed his fist of a dick into me again. He fingered under the garter belt, twisting his fingers in it.

“I want you to wear these all the time. Under jeans. To bed when I’m not there. I’ll buy you more. You be who you want when we’re not together, but

under your clothes, this is the reminder that you're mine. Understand?"

"Yes."

He unbuckled his pants. A shiver went up my spine as I watched him take his dick out. My panties were no more than a damp string at my crotch, and he pushed them out of the way, handling me roughly. His fingertips probed for my soaked opening. He jammed two fingers in me. I cried out in pleasure and spread my

legs farther, kicking a bowl and sending it crashing to the ground.

“You’re ready,” he growled, sliding his fingers out and jamming them in all the way. He ran his finger across the front wall of my hole until I felt a shudder I’d never felt. He pushed, stroking, curving his finger over a hard nodule of nerves inside me while pressing the heel of his hand on my clit. I went weak with a radiation of pleasure.

“Do you want it?”
he asked.

“Yes, Jonathan.
Please, fuck me.” He
removed his fingers and
lodged his dick in me.
“Oh, God,” I said, barely
coherent.

He moved above
me, his every stroke
hitting the mark, bringing
breaths of gratification.
He put his fingers in my
mouth, and I sucked on
them, tasting myself. His
dick spread me, pushing
against my clit, the edge
of my opening, and

sending shockwaves through me as his thrusts found their rhythm. He removed his fingers and pulled my leg over his shoulder. He went so deep, I cried out. I pushed forward, wanting him inside me, a part of me. I was so close, and as though he could sense it, he slowed down.

“Take it easy, little goddess.”

“Oh, I can’t. I’m going to come.”

“No, wait.”

“I can’t.” I was

desperate, on the edge of a cliff, a rope tied to my ankle and a boulder. The boulder was tipping over the edge of the cliff, and I would follow it to the bottom of the crevice.

“‘Invictus.’

Second stanza, Monica.” He leaned over, still moving his hips. “Do it. ‘*In the fell clutch of circumstance...*’ Slowly and with feeling, or you start over.” His voice was a beacon of control and sense in the chaos of his every stroke, every

inch a burning fuse to an explosion.

“You’re joking,” I gasped. “I can’t recite ‘Invictus’ now.”

He leaned down and sucked my nipple, leaving a trail of saliva when he looked up and said, “Do it.”

Oh, God, how could he expect me to recall eighth grade while getting fucked on a dinner table? I had to stare through the pressure to give in to my orgasm, hold it back to remember.

“In the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance.” Oh fuck, Jonathan...”

He pinned my hands over my head and started on the next line. *“My head is bloody...”* And no rushing, baby.” His thrusts got faster, deeper, more willed.

I picked up, *“But unbowed. Beyond this place of wrath and tears, looms the horror of the shade, and yet the*

menace of the years...”

“Ah, Monica. Go. Make it.” His face was reddened with effort. He wanted to come too, and that, coupled with his searing thrusts, sent the boulder over the edge.

“‘Finds and shall find me unafraid,’” I cried to the heavens. He moved to the rhythm of the poem as I continued, watching that boulder get smaller in the distance.
“‘It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with

punishments the scroll.”

He said the last stanza with me. “*I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.*”

“Yes, Monica.”

“Yes!”

I was dragged off the cliff first. I cried out his name as I fell into a chasm of blackness and tingling lights. I clenched my thighs around him. My arms wanted to flail, but he had them tight as my pussy ignited, clutching for him, pulsing for him

to be deeper. The orgasm came from deep inside, undulating up my spine and down the backs of my thighs. I lost myself in it.

I heard him grunt, miles away, then moan into a snarl of satisfaction. I gasped as he tightened above me, the base of his cock pulsing as he came. His eyes squeezed shut and his arms bent as he let go of my wrists and fell on top of me.

We twitched

together, spent, still
breathing in the rhythm of
a poem.

JONATHAN

I'll cop to having plenty of sex, much of it of the "wild" variety. I'll admit I have memories that would beat most men's imaginations. I'll tell you I've had beautiful women do exactly as I tell them and we've gotten off on the control. But that? That was a new classification of fucking.

"Jonathan?" she whispered from under me. Her uttering my name brought me to my senses.

I pulled my face out of her neck and kissed her collarbone.

“Monica.”

“Are you all right?”

“No,” I said.

“Really?”

I put my nose to hers. “Joking.” My shifted weight made my cock drop out of her.

“Ah,” she moaned as if she’d miss it. “I should use the bathroom.”

“I’ll set up dinner in the kitchen.”

She smiled, and my world went on fire. “Let’s eat it this time.”

I got off her and she sat up. Her hair was falling out of her braid and the hem of her dress was bunched around her waist. One shoe had fallen off. I found it and slipped it back onto her foot, then helped her off the table.

“Thank you,” she said.

“My pleasure.” I kissed her because I had no choice. When she

walked toward the house, I touched her neck as if I needed to tether her to me for another second. I brought the stuff on the sideboard into the kitchen and set the table. I had a handful of silverware and stopped myself.

Fork on the left, spoon above.

Or if it was a soup spoon, did it go on the right?

If she noticed I'd done it wrong, she'd tease me. I'd like that enough to throw her

across the table again, which was not what I wanted to do. We didn't have all night, and I wanted to actually share a meal with her. I put the spoons on the right and set the tureen between the bowls.

I liked her. She was great. Outstanding. Gorgeous and smart. All those words seemed cheap, though. My rejection of them alarmed me, because they weren't good enough. I was losing control, and I

needed to figure out why.

The lack of a condom was definitely something, but only part of the story. The fact that we were far enough along to feel each other's skin spoke volumes. Her looks were something also. She was beautiful, but not my type. I usually went for blondes, so maybe not. Her singing that night at Frontage ticked it up a few notches for me, but I had fucked other artists since Jessica. Monica was

honest, real, and honorable. Those were commodities I didn't see every day, and those were words worthy of her, but those qualities didn't seduce the mind or calm the heart the way she did.

I forgot where the napkins went. Fuck. Where was Aling Mira when I needed her?

The issue with Monica was obvious, but I wouldn't allow myself to utter certain words, even in my mind. Certain

commitments and feelings were simply inaccessible and needed to stay that way. I'd rejected my ex-wife, but the passions she'd thrown away were dead. I regretted that, grieved their loss, because if anyone deserved true, deep feelings, Monica did.

An honorable man would have given her up before she fell in love, choosing a small hurt over a bigger one later. But I wasn't that honorable. I wanted her

more than I'd wanted anything in a long time, and I would have her until she couldn't bear it any longer.

I felt like an animal.

I heard her clapping down the hall in those cheap, sexy shoes. When she came into the kitchen, I sighed. Her hair was down, except for a thin braid at the side of her head. She was well put together, yet she looked like someone had just fucked the shit out of

her. I held out my hand and she took it.

“I’m starving,” she said.

I pulled out the chair for her. She glanced at the setting and said nothing. Instead, she tilted her head to see what was inside the tureen. What made me think she even cared where soup spoons went? She made me unsure about the simplest things.

She sat. “That looks good.”

I ladled her stew,

and then mine. She put her napkin on her lap and waited for me to sit before she took a scoop and blew on it.

“I’m sorry. I think it’s pretty cold,” I said.

“Ooh, good, she used banana blossoms.” She pointed her spoon at a smaller dish. “Is that pinakbet?”

“Yes.” I speared a piece of okra and held it to her lips. She parted them, allowed the fork in her mouth, and slid it out, her teeth barely scraping

the silver tines.

“That’s nice,” she said, chewing.

“Have you been to the Philippines?” I asked.

She smirked. “I’ve been to Mexico.”

“No farther?” I placed another forkful of pinkabet before her.

“No.” She took the food I offered.

I poured wine for us. “I’m surprised. You seem more... worldly than that.”

She shrugged. I

noticed a little redness around her ears. "I'm not sheltered. There're plenty of ways to get into trouble in a thirty-mile radius."

"Do tell." She shrugged and took a spoonful of stew. "Come on," I said. "We'll make a trade. I'll tell you something that will make you run away if you tell me how to get into trouble in Los Angeles." The way she glanced at me made me think she had something more than

a harmless exchange of stories on her mind. She obviously didn't realize the depth and breadth of the stories I could tell without touching the things I didn't want her to know.

“Deal,” she said.

“Ladies first.”

She took a sip of wine and straightened her shoulders, as if daring me to think less of her. Then she swallowed a little too hard, and I knew that down deep, she was afraid I might. I tried to

remain impassive, but I was jumping out of my skin.

“One time...” she said, then paused.

“Go on.”

“I shot up heroin.”

I tried not to choke on my wine. “How was it?”

“Incredible.”

“Really? And just the once? I don’t get a whole story? Just six words and an adjective?”

“I’m gauging your reaction.”

“I went to private schools. My friends financed dealers and producers to ensure their own product flow. So,” I poured more wine, “how does a beautiful Catholic girl end up with a needle in her arm?”

“I’ve been tested since, you know. I’m clean.”

I didn’t say another word. I held out another bit of pinkabet, which she took. I was going to feed her until she told me about this tiny

crevice of her life.

“Ok, well.” She swallowed. “It was, like, the core of a laugh. You know that wavy good feeling you have inside before the laugh comes out? But the laugh is a release from that feeling, and when you’re done laughing, it goes away. So without the laugh, and the release, it got huge. It kind of started in my heart and worked outward like a supernova and stayed there. Imagine that feeling, that happy

feeling before you laugh, being big and *staying*. I was lying down, but I was flying, and at the same time. Well, at first it was just the good pre-laugh feeling, but then the tension came and I wanted it released, because it was painful. Emotionally painful. Like, if the tension got too much, and it broke, so much sorrow would come out.”

She paused and took a sip of wine, not looking at me. “When I

came down, I puked and I felt like crap. I mean, who wouldn't, right? But I knew the first time is the only really great time, and I didn't want to end up some sick addict. Not even to be Janis Joplin."

"But why do it in the first place?"

"Kevin... I know you're his biggest fan. He and I used to do things just to experience them. Just to see, you know, if there was something to it, or if we could translate it into our work. So we did

some stupid things.”

“But he never tied you to a bedpost?”

“No.”

“He’s a sad man.”

She laughed. “We ran with our eyes closed. We walked through downtown barefoot. We slept on Skid Row a whole weekend.”

I think I let the silence go a little too long. I was thinking about her huddled in filth under an overpass, broken glass underneath her, and strange, unstable people

within arms' reach.

“What?” she asked, sipping her wine.

“Did he *sleep*? When you were on Skid Row?”

“I guess.”

I took her hand. “I couldn’t sleep knowing you weren’t a hundred percent safe. I couldn’t walk you into danger or watch someone put a needle full of drugs in your arm. I couldn’t rest.”

“Well, good, because the piss smell

kept me up and I was hungry. Speaking of, I'm going to eat more oxtail stew, and you're going to tell me something that makes me want to walk out. Except I won't."

She took a spoonful of stew and glanced at me, so sure her feelings could survive any revelation. I had so many wonderfully juicy stories that wouldn't even half nudge her out the door. So many others would require a discussion that would

ruin the evening.

I asked, “Are sexual escapades on the table?”

“Sure.” She looked into her bowl. Maybe that was a bad idea. I didn’t want her to get bent out of shape. If she told me a story like the one I intended to tell her, I’d get bent out of shape.

“Are you sure you’re sure?”

“As long as your wife isn’t in there.”

“Why? Besides

the fact that she's not the escapade type?"

"I'm not going to pretend your ex-wife's my favorite person ever. But to me, what goes on sexually in a marriage, you don't talk about. So —" she put her hands over her ears "—la la la, don't want to hear it."

In the five minutes I had to decide what to tell her, I'd prepared a story of bedding three women at once. It was absolutely true, terribly unsexy, and

funny all at once. But she'd thrown me by respecting a woman who'd lied to her and caused her hurt, by honoring a vow she'd had no part of. Monica deserved better than a canned story I'd told a hundred times at the club.

I took her wrists and pulled her hands from her ears. She smiled at me.

“I agree,” I said. “You’re safe from my marriage bed. But not the rest.” I took my hands

away and picked up my wine glass, taking a deep breath. “There’s a difference between a dominant and a pig.”

“Really?”

“My father,” I said, leaning forward, “is a pig.” She looked as though she was ready to choke on her oxtail stew. “You all right?” I asked.

“I’m fine. I sense an example coming?”

“I hit puberty early,” I said. “By thirteen, I was done. Close to my fourteenth

birthday, my father wanted to know why I hadn't gotten laid yet."

She chewed, then gazed up me with those big, chocolate disks. "Okay?"

"He set me up on a date with a girl. Woman. Rachel. She was a couple of years older than me. That was my first time. And guess what? Turns out, she was his mistress."

She swallowed hard. "How old was she?"

“The math you just did in your head was correct.”

“Wow. He whored out his underage mistress?”

“To his underage son. Like I said. Pig. And you should see the look on your face.” Her heartbeat was practically audible. She pushed food around and I worked to control my nerves.

She sighed heavily. “Honestly, I didn’t expect you to even have a story like that.”

“You think rich people don’t have sick shit in their houses?”

She raised her eyebrows and swirled her spoon in her stew. “Something like that.”

I laughed. Partly because I was nervous about voicing a fragment of the story, and partly because I was relieved she hadn’t run away. Not yet, at least.

She put her spoon down and sipped her wine. “Did you see her again?”

“I did but on different terms. It was messy for a while.” I cleared my throat. “She died.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. How?”

“Car accident. I was about sixteen when it happened.”

I should have shut up way before mentioning the accident. If she looked into it, I was deeply fucked. So I stopped talking. Just stopped.

She waited, slid

off her chair, stepped over to me, and put her hands on my face. “You know you have to tell me the whole thing, right?”

“There is no more.” I put my hand up her skirt until I felt the lacy top of her stocking. “You’re going to have to take the dress off for where we’re going next.”

“Upstairs?”

I put my fingers under the lace and up the garter straps. “Nope.”

“Where?”

“Have you

finished dinner?”

“Yes.”

I pulled her down, kissing her hard. She tasted of lovingly made Filipino food and cold white wine. I wanted her all over again, but we had someplace to be.

CHAPTER 7.

MONICA

I slipped into my jeans, keeping my fancy underwear on. I felt filthy, sexy, sensual with garters under denim. When I reached the front foyer, I found the door open and a loud rumbling in the driveway.

Jonathan straddled a matte black rocket of a motorcycle with red touches at the rims. The back seat was suspended by nothing but air and the promise of

velocity.

“Well,” I said as I clopped down the porch stairs in my heels, “is this new or is it some old thing you found in the back of the garage?”

“I got rid of the Mercedes and saw this.” He handed me a helmet in the same matte black as the bike. “You’ve ridden before?”

“Yeah.” I slipped on the helmet. I’d dirtbiked with Kevin in the Sequoias until mud covered me from knee to

toe and I walked like a cowboy coming home from a week on a feisty mare. Once, in freshman year, Ivan Ikanovitch took me out to Ventura on his new BMW. Needless to say, I had to take a cab home.

“Let’s go then, little goddess. This trip usually takes forty minutes, and we have thirty five.”

I slid onto the back seat and put my arms around his waist. “You shoulda let me

recite ‘Invictus’ as fast as I wanted. We’d be on time.”

The gate slid open as if by his thought waves alone, and we took off, my legs clenching the seat and my arms clutching his waist. When we stopped at a light, I heard his voice in my head.

“You’re cutting off my circulation.”

The clarity of his voice was shocking, and he turned to me, tapping the helmet.

“There are microphones in here?”
He nodded. “Fancy.”

The light changed, and we took off. We didn’t talk much as we zipped onto the five, turning onto the 110 freeway. I tried not to squeal when he went really fast since he could hear me. Instead, I leaned on him, enjoying the softness of his leather jacket and the way it creaked against mine. Even though it was early November, the air was

warm as it whipped under my clothes.

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. He was fourteen when his father loaned him his mistress. His first sexual experience was coated in familial ties and discomfort. He went to the institution when he was sixteen, right about when she was killed. He'd given me a portion of the story. His time in the institution had something to do with his father's promiscuity and

penchant for young girls, as well as his absurd expectations of his son's virility.

I was still missing some puzzle pieces. Something was very seriously off, but his explanation was a start, and I felt a sort of relief knowing that eventually, when he was ready, he'd fill in the blanks.

We traveled eighty miles an hour past the industrial tinkertoy skyline and outlet malls with their blindingly

bright, sky-high screens,
blasting high above
neighborhoods still
burned out from the riots,
and back to a middle-
class residential zone.

I slipped my hand
under his jacket, then
under his shirt. I felt his
taut stomach and the little
hairs on it, the warmth of
his skin making me feel
safe and cared for.

“Are you making
a pass at me?” he asked
in my head.

“Not at this
speed.”

“Okay, because I’m having you in a couple of hours.”

“I know.” I leaned my head on his back. “You’re a big ho.”

“Only for you these days.”

I hoped my sigh wasn’t audible through the microphone. I knew I was choosing to believe him, and that choice was conscious, and thus, fallible. I knew he could walk out on me at any minute, for any reason. If he really was over his

wife, he could look for a more permanent mate with whom he had more in common, like money, and social standing, and similar friends and interests.

But I chose, maybe unwisely, to believe he wanted me for more than a short time because it made me happy to think it.

I was screwed.

He turned off the freeway at Carson, and after a few more quick pivots, he slowed in front

of a grassy, floodlit field where a blimp was parked.

“We made it,” he said, pulling up to the chain-link fence around the field’s perimeter. A man in a white shirt and vinyl jacket approached us with a clipboard. Jonathan took off his helmet. His hair was a complete wreck, a school of wild-armed starfish backlit by floodlights. He fingerbrushed it and faced the man with the clipboard.

“Mister Drazen?”

“Yeah.”

“You just made it. Park the bike in the lot to the left. Have fun.”

“How are they doing?” asked Jonathan. I took off my helmet. I could only imagine what my hair looked like. A bunch of broken strings in the same backlighting, no doubt. And the little braid I’d left coming from my part probably looked like a dreadlock.

“Down two in the second. Having trouble

getting men on base,” the man with the clipboard said.

Jonathan shook his head and started the bike again. We cruised to the center of the lot and parked by a sheet metal trailer held up by a cinderblock foundation. He put the kickstand down and leaned the bike over until it was stable.

“What was that?” I asked, dismounting first. “The game? They’re losing already?”

He got off and set

the bike straight.
“Apparently.”

“Are we going on
the blimp?”

“If you’re good.”

“And we’re going
to Dodger Stadium?
Maybe? I don’t want to
assume, but the second
blimp always comes
about the fifth inning.” I
was trying to keep my
shit together, but I’d lived
my whole life in the
Stadium’s backyard and
had never found a way to
even get into a playoff
game. When I knew the

right people, the team had been in the basement. During good years, I'd been hanging with people who didn't "do" sports because organized team activities were uncreative, uncivilized, and boorish.

"Yes," Jonathan said. "We're going to see the game from the sky if you move that tight little ass. They won't wait."

I jumped on him. I couldn't help it. I'm only made of flesh and blood, and that blood is Dodger

blue. I kissed his face and wrapped my legs around him. He caught me, hitched me up by the backs of the knees, and started for the blimp. The white noise was deafening, and before he let me down, I said in his ear, “Thank you.”

He took my hand, smiling as if he was pleased to see me so happy, and we ran across the grass to the huge machine. It was bigger than I'd imagined. Massive. Overwhelming.

A tire company's name was written across it in letters two or three times my height. I couldn't hear any of the men who greeted us, but I put on my customer service smile. In this case, it couldn't have been more genuine.

We were hustled into a gondola with six seats facing front. The two at the windshield were pilot and copilot. Jonathan and I were guided in behind that, and behind us were two men

who appeared to be businessmen. We were surrounded by windows, but Jonathan made sure I got the seat closest to a view. I jumped in. I wanted to talk to him, but it was simply too loud. The copilot gave us headphones with mikes on them.

I heard Jonathan say, “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Baby,” I said, smiling until I felt my

face might snap in two,
“I’m a sure thing tonight.”

Everyone in the cabin cracked up. Of course they could all hear me. Jonathan put his arm around me and pulled me to him, kissing my forehead while he laughed. I buried my head in his chest.

“Don’t worry, miss,” said the pilot, his voice loud and clear. “We get that a lot.” After a pause, he continued. “I’m Larry. This here is my copilot, Rango. We’ll

be heading for East Los Angeles in a few seconds, set to arrive at Dodger Stadium in about forty minutes. Hold on, takeoff can be a little jarring for first timers. Buckle in.”

The noise got even louder. I found my buckles and strap. Jonathan helped me click in, then he took my hand. Seconds later, I felt as if I was being launched from a rocket. Larry turned a wooden steering wheel set between his seat and

Rango's.

"I'll have the game on," Rango chimed in. "We're in the bottom of the fourth against the New York Yankees. Cashen is pitching for the Yanks as we speak."

I closed my eyes and heard Jonathan's voice. "Open your eyes. These flights are hard to get, even for me."

I opened them and looked at him in the darkened cabin. He touched my cheek and smiled, and I felt

protected and secure. Even if it was an illusion, knowing he was there made me feel less like I was shooting out a cannon and more like I was on a fun trip I wouldn't have dreamed up for myself.

The city spread beneath us in a blanket of lights made of a plaid of streets, freeways, and floodlit parks. I couldn't tear my eyes away. We were low enough to see cars and people but high enough to turn them into

dots of velocity and intention. Everyone was headed somewhere, and we were above, passing in the wind.

The game wasn't going well for my team. I listened without discussion as another inning went by with three men stranded on base, a pitcher who threw balls that were fouled off until I knew he must be exhausted, and a beaner that may have left star hitter Jose Inuego with a concussion.

I felt Jonathan leaning over me to see the window. He rested his chin on my shoulder, then his lips landed on my neck. Leaning there, we looked out the window together. The gondola chilled as the minutes went by, and though we had jackets, I put my hand on his and found his fingers icy. I moved one of his hands between my knees to warm it and folded the other in mine. We stayed like that, looking out the

window, his chest to my back, his chin on my neck, and his hands warmed by my body, until I saw Elysian Park. I probably could have picked my house out from there.

“Look!” I sounded like a kid. “I can see it!”

It seemed to take as long to get over the stadium from the moment I saw it as it took for us to get to Los Angeles from Carson. Another blimp passed us, heading

away from the game. Larry and Rango waved at the pilots. I was filled with contentment and a feeling of rightness, of being a part of something bigger than myself. I'd only felt that during orchestra practice in college, and only when everything was going right. The percussionist was spot on, the conductor spoke in a manual language as easy to understand as the written word, and we all followed as if lifted by

the same tide.

As the feeling slipped away, I wanted nothing more than to recapture it. I pulled my headphones off and faced Jonathan. His eyes were visible from the lights on the pilot's dashboard. He pulled his microphone out of the way. I kissed him, and I didn't care who saw. I molded my lips to his and fed him my tongue. He took his hand from between my knees and put it to my cheek, warmed from my body,

gentle to the touch. I extended that feeling of rightness for another minute until the gondola seemed to blaze with light.

I opened my eyes. We were right over the stadium. I took one last look at Jonathan and mouthed the words, *Sure thing*.

He mouthed back, *I know*, and I smiled.

I'd never seen a game like that before, and I found it disconcerting initially. I was used to

television, where I could see every twitch and nod of the pitcher, and live games from the bleachers, where I could tell the direction of the ball from the sound it made coming off the bat. From the blimp, the players looked like white flowers on a perfect lawn.

I put my headphones back on and leaned into the window. The announcer was going on about pitch counts and men on base, and I heard

the guys in the gondola doing much the same. The Yanks were up. Men on first and third. One out. Harvey Rodriguez was on deck.

Larry cut the engine, and the noise reduced. “We’re gonna hover until a commercial, then fire it up again.”

Jonathan put his lips to my ear. “Rodriguez is a lefty. They’re going for a double play. Watch the infield.” The shortstop and third baseman took

two steps toward first. “They step toward right field because a lefty pulls that way, and forward to get the ball on the jump so they can pop it to second on the force play. And they’re playing it a little forward because there’s a guy on third who can go for the steal on a wild pitch or a sac fly.”

“But what if the fly is shallow? They’ll miss it, and it’ll be a mess. The outfield just came in a little, too. I

mean, Rodriguez barely has to work to sac a guy in.”

“You take your chances. They’re down by two, so if a guy strolls home on a sac fly, it’s a bummer, but there’s not much difference in the middle of the game between being down two and down three. There’s more to gain with the double play.”

Rodriguez walked. Bases were loaded. Some moments in a ball game were more

important than others. They weren't the grand slams or the fat, bobbling errors at shortstop. They were the bases-loaded, one-man-out moments where either someone scored or someone was stopped dead. They were unpredictable, uncontrollable, and oftentimes silent as death. Like the one extra foul ball that would have been a third strike. Or the pitcher catching the line drive that would have sent a man or two home.

Or a walk to load the bases.

“I can’t watch.” I covered my eyes. I couldn’t see anything from up there anyway. I just saw dots move around and heard the broadcast. But Jonathan reached from behind me and took my wrists, pulling them down.

“Come on. Play with me. Don’t bail.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, joking on his use of the word *play*. The infield moved way in,

practically to where the dirt met the grass, and Jonathan's arms tightened. His hands, now warm, draped over my crossed forearms. "I know they're playing in to catch the guy at home plate if they have to," I said.

"Yes." He kissed my neck once, twice, three times, each one softer than the one before. Each lingered longer than the last. I tingled all over, and it took all my self-control

to keep from bending my head back and leaning into him. I would have looked exactly like what I was: a woman in heat.

We were interrupted by the crack of a bat through the headphones we'd taken off. The white flowers scuttled across the lawn. The shortstop fielded the ball, got it to second, and then Val Renault, an unimposing fielder known for his hitting, got the ball out of his hand and to first quickly and

accurately enough to complete the double play.

Inning over.

An hour and a half later, the game ended with the Dodgers winning by a run and forcing a seventh game. The six passengers on the gondola erupted at the last out. We high-fived and cheered and headed back to Carson.

CHAPTER 8 .

MONICA

I was a little wobbly getting off the gondola, but Jonathan put his arm around me and pulled me close as we went back to the bike. We thanked the employees we passed as they got the blimp back into place with ropes and pulleys. If their attitudes were any indication, managing a tire company's blimp was the most gratifying job in the world.

We approached

the bike holding hands.
“Thank you,” I said.
“That was probably in
my top five dates ever.”

“Top *five*?”

“Top four,
maybe.”

He faced me.
“What?”

I shrugged. “It
was a compliment.”

He pressed his
lips between his teeth.
Before I could decide if
he was suppressing rage
or laughter, he ducked
and thrust forward,
throwing me over his

shoulder. I squealed and kicked, bouncing as he ran. He pushed me against the side of the metal shed with a clang, pressing my shoulders to the wall.

“Name your top three. I’ll beat them.”

“With what?” I asked.

“I’ll take you to the fucking moon and have you back in time for bed.”

“Oh, Jonathan. The moon? Really?” I rolled my eyes.

He just smiled, all teeth and joy. “You’re getting such a spanking tonight.”

“Kiss me first,” I said. “Maybe you’ll get in the top three.”

He took my hands and yanked them over my head, then kissed me. Or to be more accurate, he attacked me with his body. He pinned my hands hard and pushed his cock against me, grinding his lips against mine. His tongue filled me without finesse, as if

he was fucking my mouth. I pushed myself against him in a rhythm until I groaned. I had to have him. He pushed back against me as if trying to get me, through our clothes, to beg for him.

“Hello,” came a voice. Jonathan let my arms go and looked around. It was one of the guys who had wrestled the blimp to the ground. “We’re closing up here.”

“Thanks,”

Jonathan said without a hint of embarrassment or

shame. He popped my helmet off the bike and handed it to me. A smile spread across his face like an uncontrollable oil spill. I took the helmet with the same grin.

The ride home passed with few words. I just rested against him with my hand under his shirt, feeling his warmth. I didn't stroke or caress him at eighty miles an hour, though the temptation was distracting.

He pulled the

bike into my driveway. It was midnight, or close to it, and I was sore all over. “You coming in?” I asked, looping his finger in mine. He yanked me to him.

“We playing? Or am I just throwing you down and fucking you?”

Both options held appeal. Something hot and sweaty before an utter collapse into oblivion would be nice, and I’d be fresh and bright in the morning for work. But when he said

“playing,” I felt wetness condense between my legs, and a shiver went up my spine. I let my finger drop from his and put my arms to my sides. I wanted to be under his control, under his dominance, under *him*. I wanted to forget myself in him and to forget the shame of wanting it so badly.

“I’d like to play again,” I said, then added, “Sir.”

“Up to the porch with you then, and wait

for me.” When I turned around to go, he slapped my ass hard. I gasped and strode up the steps.

Jonathan dismounted and, instead of coming right up the porch, stood on the sidewalk. He looked up at the house, then crossed the street and did the same. He jogged back and came past my chain-link fence. “You’re wide open to the street.”

“Sir?”

“It means you have to keep your clothes

on until we get inside.”

My street, partly because of the hill and partly because of the neighborhood, was dead at night. If two people passed between midnight and eight in the morning, it would be a newsworthy event. I had the feeling it didn't matter. He stared at me, calculating. I knew that look. He was constructing the game. He faced the street and me, feet planted on my porch, and said, “Step over

here, my little goddess.”

I did it, heart
pounding with
anticipation. My back
faced the street.

“Unbutton your
jeans.”

I popped them.

“Unzip, please.”

I did, showing my
garter belt and the tops of
my new, already-
christened lingerie. He
stroked my stomach, his
finger grazing the top of
the lace.

“Touch yourself.”

He watched my

hand go down my pants. Between the sweet, secret caresses in the blimp, and the bike ride home, I was ready for him. I shuddered when my fingers found my swollen, soaked pussy. I buckled with pleasure, and he held my chin.

“Stand up.” He put upward pressure on my chin, forcing my spine straight and my view upward. “How wet are you?”

“Very wet, sir.”

“What would you

like me to do about it?”

“I want you to fuck me, please.”

“Hold up your hand.”

I slid my hand out of my pants and held it up. The moisture on my fingers glistened. He kissed the tips of my fingers, then put them in his mouth. I gasped as he slid his tongue over them, sucking everything off. His lips might as well have been on my pussy, and I almost buckled again.

“You’re
delicious,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“Now, do you
remember your ready
position?”

“Yes, sir.” I
wondered how many
more times I could call
him *sir* without
spontaneously coming.

“And your
safeword?”

“Tangerine, sir.”

“Go inside, get
undressed, and wait for
me in ready position. Be
in any room you want.

I'll find you." A smirk played at his mouth. "You have sixty seconds, and you'd better be ready."

I unlocked my door and entered the house. Where to go? I wanted to participate in the game. Surprise him. Make him earn it. So the bedroom was the first place I dismissed. The bathroom was in no condition. That was out. The living room had a nice soft couch, and I could be ready on the coffee table. That would

be kind of cool, but the living room was right at the front door, and where was the fun if he practically tripped on me as he walked in?

I undressed as I walked through the house, dropping my shirt in the hamper and kicking my shoes into a corner. No. I retrieved the shoes.

I turned on hall lights and all the warm, indirect lamps. He preferred that kind of lighting, if his house and office were any

indication. I'd yanked my pants off and slipped my shoes back on by the time I heard the screen door creak.

I crouched on the kitchen floor, behind the counter, knees and cheek on the linoleum, my hands between my legs until they touched my ankles. I had a wonderful view of under the counter. Not sexy. I turned my face to the kitchen table. Better.

I heard Jonathan close the front door, then

his feet on the living room floor, down the hall, to the bedroom, where I wasn't. His smell permeated the air almost immediately, and I drank it in, waiting, my snatch high, a beacon of arousal.

His footsteps got closer. "The kitchen. Little goddess, you are beautiful." His boots came in my field of vision. "The kitchen," he repeated pensively. The refrigerator door opened and its light soaked the

room. “What do you eat?”

“I eat at work. They feed us. And I order food out.”

He grumbled. From his angle, I couldn't see him, but I felt the sting of his displeasure nonetheless. He closed the fridge, and the room was again lit by the two hallways on each side. He whistled, and though at first I didn't recognize the tune, it came to me at the chorus. “Under My Skin,” the song I'd sung

the night he surprised me at Frontage.

I heard some clacking and banging, a drawer opening, and the crumple of plastic bags. My heart seized. Plastic bags? Maybe something had been in them that he was managing? Or maybe he was moving something out of the way? Or filling one?

I simply couldn't see without getting out of position, and though I was overtaken by panic, I wasn't ready to give up

on the game yet. But the
panic wasn't fun.
“Jonathan?”

A pause, then,
“Monica?”

“You're not going
to put a bag over my
head, are you?”

Another pause.
He came into my field of
vision, looking into my
face from six feet above.
“Never.”

I immediately
relaxed. “Thank you, sir.”

I realized, from
the change in my throat's
vibrations, that as much

as Jonathan had a dominant voice, I had a submissive one. I used softly articulated hard consonants and breathy, aspirated vowels. I felt silly, suddenly, in such a position on the kitchen floor, ass up in stiletto heels, hands to my ankles, while my fully dressed kinda-boyfriend fucked around with the stuff in my kitchen. I knew the break in mood was my fault, but I couldn't have tolerated another second of being

afraid.

His boots came in my field of vision again. They were brown, to match his jacket, and ridiculously sexy with his jeans. “Let’s talk about ready position.” He kneeled at my side and stroked my back and ass, letting his fingertips graze the crack. “This...” He slapped my ass and I gasped in surprise. “This is not ready position.” He spanked me again. My cheek erupted in heat and tingles, which he

exacerbated by stroking where he'd hit. "Up." He spanked the lower part, where meat met thigh. I straightened my legs. "More." I thought he would slap me, but he stroked instead, eliciting a groan that turned into a cry when he spanked me hard.

I jerked my hips up, not because I wanted him to stop spanking me, but because I wanted to do it right. My twat was fully in the air over an arched back. My breath

heaved. I saw him at the edge of my vision, kneeling beside me in his long-sleeve shirt and suit slacks, his hand on my ass and pulling away for another slap that felt like a leather belt. The air left my lungs, leaving pleasure in the wake of the pain.

“The point of this,” he said, “is that you are completely ready for me. I should be able to see your cunt is wet. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

He ran a finger down my back, to my crack, and to my cleft, circling my clit before going back up again. “If you’re crouched, I can’t see it.”

I couldn’t form words.

“I’m sorry, Monica, I didn’t hear you.” He slapped the backs of my thighs, right at my snatch. It stung, and then pleasure blossomed like a thousand flowers.

“Yes.”

He spanked me

there again. “Sorry?”

I cried out.

“Shh. Behave.”

“Yes,” I gasped.

“Yes what?”

I knew that game.

If I wanted him to continue, and I did, I knew how to do it. “Just yes.”

He slapped me again, landing enough of his hand on my snatch to make me bite back another cry. “Monica, is there something you want?”

“Do it again,

please.” I don’t know how I made words out of gasps, but I did.

He did. And then again, harder, and the sharper the pain, the more exquisite the pleasure. My ass must have been red by the third slap, but my pussy wanted more. He stroked me in between, to accentuate the tingle of pain, then held back his slaps until I thought I’d die with anticipation. When they landed, everything between my

legs bloomed to pleasure. I thought I'd be overwhelmed with it, consumed, but he stopped, moved behind me, and took a cheek in each palm. He kissed my ass all over, softly, creating little stings of sore pain with his lips. He spread my cheeks apart while his thumbs stroked the sopping crack between.

“How do you feel, little goddess?”

“Beautiful.”

“Good.” He

grabbed a handful of my hair and gently pulled me to a kneeling position. He came around to face me and got on his knees, a ball of plastic bags in his fist. “Your wrists.”

I put them out. The plastic bags had been stretched and knotted together at the handles. When he touched me to tie my hands together, I felt arousal and relief. His touch was sure and gentle, his voice humming an old Sinatra

tune that would always make me think of him.

When my wrists were bound, he eased me back, pulled my arms over my head, and looped my plastic binds to a drawer handle. He leaned over me, working the knot. So close, I breathed him in through his shirt. That smell mixed with the scent of getting tied up and fucked became the smell of complete release, of an orchestra connected by the simple movements of

a skilled conductor. When he was done, he drew his hands down my arms, to my rib cage, thumbs stroking my nipples, and stretched me out across the floor until my arms were straight.

“Perfect,” he said, more to himself than me. He pulled up my knees and spread them until they were to either side of my breasts. He leaned back and looked at his work. I saw his erection straining his pants, and I wanted to

reach out and touch it. I was tied, and being stretched out added to the sensation of being exposed.

Jonathan pulled his shirt off, and I wanted to touch him even more. I wanted to run my fingers through his chest hair, to his belly, and follow the line of hair to his cock. When he pulled his pants off, it popped out, that wonderful thing. I hoped he'd stick it in my mouth. I wanted to eat it, take it down my throat with my

hands tied to a drawer handle. I wanted to watch him come from below him, to see him throw his head back in surrender.

He picked up something off the counter before kneeling between my legs.

“Goddess, this has been done so many times before, it’s almost boring.” He held up a can of whipped cream. “You and I are too good for it. But it’s two weeks from its expiration date, and we need to talk about the

contents of your refrigerator.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Open up.”

I opened my mouth, and he squirted some in. He kissed me before I could swallow. The cream mixed between our tongues and dripped down my chin. Still kissing me, he put the cold can on my nipple, sending shivers of pleasure down my body. He pulled away and kneeled between my legs. He squirted each nipple,

topping me like a cake, the can making a *kkkkkkkt* sound. He licked it off, then sucked each nipple, biting at the end. I gasped and threw my legs up higher. Pulling himself up, he regarded the can.

“This tip is interesting, actually,” he said.

“Only you would find it interesting.”

He placed the tip of the dispenser at my sternum, the pointed tooth digging into my skin. “Excuse me?”

“Only you, sir.” I tried not to smile and wink. We didn’t need to break the mood twice in one session.

The can had a pointed, plastic tip that made the whipped cream come out in a striated tube. When placed against the sensitive skin of the chest and abdomen, and slowly dragged while dispensing product, it created more than a sweet, decorative texture. It scratched, opening up the nerve

endings so that when the cold whipped cream hit it, the sensation radiated out. Cold. Soft. More so than just cream on skin. Something multiplied by an order of magnitude. When he followed it with his mouth, the result was delicious for us both. He turned the coldness warm, and with the textured top of his tongue, he made the softness rough.

Jonathan dragged the can below my jeweled navel to the tip

of my cleft, his tongue right behind. The anticipation made me gasp, which turned into a little squeal. “Shh, now. Be good,” he said softly.

He drew the can, its sharp edge, and his warm, rough tongue inside my thigh. I was a throbbing, swollen hot mess by the time he put the can down and placed the tip of his tongue between my legs. He moved slowly up and down my slit, a tease that left me gasping, thrusting,

pulling against the plastic bags binding me.

Bringing his tongue back up my abdomen, he landed on my mouth in a kiss. I opened my mouth for him, tasting the mix of cream and sex on his tongue.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I want you.”

“You have me.”

“I want your dick in me,” I said.

“When?”

“Please, sir,” I

breathed, “any time after right now is good.”

He smiled and kneeled above me, spreading my legs. He dragged his finger up and down my pussy. My hips hitched, and I flung my knees farther apart, begging for him without a word. With one hand on my kitchen cabinet and another guiding his cock, he slid inside me, pushing in and rocking before pulling out. He closed his eyes and moaned. Seeing him feel

pleasure brought my mind and body to the same focus. He thrust inside again, harder that time, and a sound left my lungs even as I tried to remain quiet.

“How do you want it, Monica?”

Could I ask? And how? Wasn't what I wanted exactly what scared me most?

“I want to please you,” I whispered, telling the truth but avoiding the real answer. My pussy was almost in charge and

doing the talking. As long as I had that last sliver of control, I didn't have to admit anything.

“You please me,” he said, moving in and out of me in a slow, forceful rhythm. “How can I please you? Say it. Say what you want.”

I was close, on the edge. Stoking a white-hot fire where his dick and my body met, I couldn't decide what to say. He sped up just a little, and the words came out of me unfiltered

before I had a chance to be afraid. “Take me,” I groaned. “Use me.”

It took him one slow thrust to start pounding me, deep and hard. Fast. As though his only goal was to finish. He put a hand on my breast and squeezed it. The backs of my thighs, sore from spanking, ached with each thrust as his skin hit mine. Being under him, trapped, objectified, I lost all fear. With Jonathan, I felt safe. I felt a loss of control so

complete, a surrender so honest that it became a luxurious indulgence.

“Jonathan, I’m...”

I had no words. He was fucking the air right out of me.

“Go.” He could barely get words out himself. “Yes.”

“Oh...”

If he’d told me to be quiet, I wouldn’t have heard the command over my own cry. The wordless sound, not even defined by a vowel, shot up from the base of my

spine and out my mouth. I clenched around him, twisting. He held me straight, still beating me with his cock, as I came in a series of explosions that felt like the pounding of a drum hit hard, repeatedly, until it was hot with friction and resistance.

His name left my lips over and over. *Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan.*

He slowed down and fell back into a rhythm. He hadn't come

yet, and I wanted him to. I wanted to own his orgasm the way he'd owned mine.

“Sir,” I said. He put his face close to mine. “Use me for your pleasure. Please. Have me.” God, what had I become? Such a whore that when he smiled at the thought of whatever he intended, I felt a surge of delight at pleasing him.

He kissed me, then reached up to the counter and retrieved a steak knife. I was still out

of breath when he cut me from the drawer handle. My hands, however, were still tied together. He looked at me with a devilish grin when he stood up.

“On your knees, little goddess.” I couldn’t with my hands tied, at least not fast enough. He pulled me up by the bicep. My pussy throbbed, and when I got to a kneeling position, I felt warm fluid drip down my leg. Standing before me, his pussy-

slick cock in front of my eyes, was my master. He was the ache between my legs, the desire in my belly, the tingle on my skin, the very embodiment of my gratification.

I felt his hand on the back of my head, grabbing a handful of hair and pushing my face forward. I opened my mouth, and he shifted, guiding his wet dick in me. I tasted the sharpness of my snatch on him. Slowly, the length of him

went down my throat, and he groaned, tilting his head back in that same position of surrender he had the first time my lips touched his cock. I breathed and took him again, slowly, my tongue coursing him. He jerked out a little, then shoved himself back in, all the way, until my nose touched his stomach. His full, hard shaft filled my mouth. I groaned, vibrating his head.

“Look at me.”

I cast my eyes

upward. His face was slack with arousal. I leaned back, still looking at him, letting his cock slip from my mouth.

“I own you,” he said. He grabbed the back of my head harder, pulling the hair painfully, and pushed back in. His eyes closed a little, and a long breath escaped his lips. “Ah. That’s right. I. Own. You.”

We watched each other as his thrusts got shorter and faster. I had to breathe through my

nose and concentrate on not losing him, not looking away, opening up for him totally as he fucked my mouth.

“Monica,” he whispered. His eyes dropped lower and he whispered again, “Monica, Monica, I’m coming, baby. Take it. Ah.”

I took him deeper, letting him come right down my throat, the base of his cock pulsing on my lower lip.

“Fuck,” he

whispered like a prayer, bending in supplication and release. His eyes closed, and after a final hitch in his breath, he pulled out, the last of his erection slick with spit and sex.

“How you doing, sir?” I was smirking. He’d tied my hands and forced the rhythm, but his orgasm was mine. He reached for the steak knife again, and I held my hands up. Slashing my binding, he bent down to take me in his arms. He

lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around him, resting my head on his shoulder. He carried me out of the kitchen as if I was a child.

CHAPTER 9.

JONATHAN

I don't know how a man can feel ripped apart and whole at the same time.

Under her covers, on my side, and facing her wasn't close enough. I twisted my legs in hers, touched her face while she talked, and held her hand on the mattress.

When I'd carried her out of the kitchen, she'd been sticky all down her front. Her braid was a big knot. Her ass

cheeks were pink and sore. Her throat was coated in my orgasm.

I took her straight to the bathroom so we could shower. We soaped, and kissed, and laughed, but she was wiped out. Her eyes drooped, and her hands worked over her body lazily. When we'd finished, I put a towel around her and brushed her hair. She insisted on a braid, so I put a loose one down her back, just to get it over with, and

carried her to bed.

“I’m sorry about breaking the mood with the plastic bags,” she whispered.

I stroked her cheek. “It’s fine. I don’t want to asphyxiate you, Monica. That’s way past my threshold.”

“I was scared.”

“I know. And I don’t want you to be scared, either.”

“I should have put that on the list.”

“We’ll make a new list.” I touched her

forehead and drew my fingers down, forcing her eyes closed.

“You’re my king, Jonathan.” She’d opened her eyes, but they looked heavy. I kissed them over and over, eyelids, cheek, nose, lips, eyelids again, forcing them closed over and over. When her eyes stayed closed, I knew she was asleep, and I could rest.

But I didn’t. I replayed the night in my head while looking out her window. Dogs

barked. A police siren faded into range, then out. She hummed a little in her sleep, then stopped. She'd thought I was going to choke her. She'd thought I was going to put a plastic bag over her head until her body seized up. For thrills.

Obviously, she didn't trust me yet. It would take time and patience. I hadn't given either to a woman since Jessica because I gave her too much. My relationship with Monica

could only go one place. Me, exposed to her, raw at the edges, breaking down at a shareholder meeting. Crying like—

I couldn't let myself finish that thought.

In the dead of night, when everyone else slept, was when it happened. I'd never been much of a sleeper, maxing out at four hours a night by the time I'd finished adolescence. Having business in Asia helped. I could make calls and send emails.

Taking a lot of women to bed helped with the voices a little, but the dead-of-night hours were still spent alone. Then it took over.

It was my father's voice. The voice told me that the things I had done wrong were irreversible. My mistakes were yokes I could either break under or become strong enough to pull, but they could not be shaken. Marrying Jessica, which I had convinced myself was the only *right* thing I'd done,

sat front and center. I'd screwed it up by trying to get her to fit into my sexual fantasies. If I'd stayed silent, just done things her way, I could have been happy. In the dead of night, the regret of putting my desires above love split me, gutted me, dragged me into despair. Come morning, the voice slumbered. The torment played on an infinite loop until I dreaded the sun's dip below the skyline.

The voice was

quiet that night, just a hum of warning. I could be that man again very easily. It was no harder than tripping on a bump in the sidewalk or cutting myself shaving, a slip in concentration long enough to lose control. I could fall off the tightrope to either side if I blinked at the wrong time.

I forced my eyes closed and listened to Monica's breaths. Eventually, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 10.

MONICA

I woke up at 5:16 a.m., sore everywhere. My feet hurt from the stilettos. My knees from kneeling on the kitchen floor. My pussy from getting fucked hard, twice. My ass from the spanking. My tits from the biting and pulling. I wanted Jonathan again. I had about an inch of my body, somewhere, that wasn't throbbing and sore. He needed to find it and fuck it.

I heard his voice from far away, and I realized he wasn't next to me. He was on the side patio, facing the driveway and talking on the phone. After using the bathroom and getting into a robe and slippers, I joined him outside.

He sat at the little table I'd found on the corner of Echo Park Ave and Montana. His elbow was on the glass as he wrote something in a notebook and tapped something else into his

phone.

“Good morning,”

I said.

He reached for me, pulling me into his lap. “Good morning.” I flinched when my butt touched the hard surface of his knee. “Sorry,” he said when he saw me lower myself slowly. “I mean, I’m not.”

“Me neither.” I leaned into the pain and sat on his leg.

“I have to go to Washington in a few days. I could be gone a

week. A congressman from Arkansas doesn't want me building hotels overseas. I have an appointment to kiss his ass."

He wasn't just telling me he had to split. He was apologizing. I kissed him long and hard, running my fingers through his hair. "I knew you traveled a lot even before I met you."

"Will you keep yourself busy without me?" he asked.

"In all the most

boring ways.”

He slipped his hand between my legs and stroked inside my thigh. “What will you do?”

“I’ll call you at night,” I whispered.

“What else?” His fingertips touched my snatch just a little, like a threat of more.

“I’ll text you every time I think of you. So, all the time.” I opened my legs for him.

“Uh huh.”

“I’ll go to work.”

“Yes.” He
breathed on my neck, his
finger so close to finding
me sore, wet, and ready.

“I have to work
on the B.C. Mod piece.
We’re really behind.”

His hand stopped
dead. “When I’m away?”

I cringed a little
inside. Shit. “You’re
away a lot. Should I stop
working?”

“Maybe I should
take you with me
everywhere.”

I stood and threw
myself into the other

chair. “You think I’m going to run off and fuck someone else as soon as your back is turned? What kind of person do you think I am?”

He put his elbow on the arm of his chair and rubbed his eyes. I had an inner, boiling-hot rage cooled only by remembering what his wife did. He needed reassurance, not defensiveness. Even if he didn’t and couldn’t love me, thinking he didn’t have feelings or carry

baggage was immature.

He said, “I trust you. I don’t trust *him*.”

I leaned forward and softened my voice. “It could be huge for me. Kevin is very important —”

“I don’t want to hear that name.”

“How are we supposed to talk about it? I mean, you trust me, but you don’t trust him. Do you think he’ll rape me?” I crossed my legs.

He took a long pause, looking at me. I

would have bet two weeks' tips he was deciding whether or not to say something, or reveal a piece of information, but he looked away and tapped his notebook. "Do you think his Eclipse piece said anything about how he'll treat you?"

"He's Kevin Wainwright. He starts with the obvious emotions, then gets cold, then flushes what he can't use down the toilet. So that piece? I never saw

the documentation, but my guess is someone just bought a pile of drawings of a dark-haired woman getting the shit beat out of her.”

“How is he starting this piece with you? What’s the early documentation look like?”

His eyes didn’t waver from mine, so he must have seen my reaction. My ears got hot and my arms tensed, because Kevin’s studio had been filled with

raunchy sex drawings. Was that what he intended to work on with me? Were we talking about love or sex or the intersection of both? Had I been naïve and foolish?

“You can’t get in the way of my work, Jonathan.”

“He wants to hurt you, Monica.”

“He doesn’t know how.”

“You’re wrong. Very, very wrong.”

I crossed my arms to match my legs. “Is

there something you want to tell me?”

He swallowed, watching me. I watched him back. The tension made my heart pound, my palms sweat. My neck broke out in goose bumps, but I would not waver.

“I do have something to tell you,” he said.

“Okay.”

“When I say I own you, it’s just a manner of speaking. It doesn’t mean you don’t

have your own life, or you're a possession I can throw away when I'm bored. It means I am directly responsible for your well-being. If I sense a threat to your health or happiness, I will step in to protect you, even if you don't want me to."

Those words, so cold and practical, without a flowery phrase or hyperbole, made my lower lip quiver and a swelling, wet pressure collect in my eyes. Fuck.

“You can’t keep me from working,” I said, breathing hard, trying to forget the tears threatening to drop. “You have my word. I’m yours. You are the only man I want. I know what happened to you before —”

“Monica, you’re not hearing me—”

“I am hearing you. You think Kevin wants to hurt me, and I’m telling you he can only hurt me if I give him my body, which I won’t do.”

He leaned forward as though he wanted to touch me, but wouldn't. "You said yourself he gets raw, then he gets cold, and then he does the piece. Maybe you're the piece."

I watched my hands fidget. "I can't stop my career for maybes." My eyes went back to him. "When I say you're a king, you are. You rule the world. You have everything. You can do whatever you want. I'm nobody. I have nothing to

call my own. I could die tomorrow, and I'd be forgotten in a year. Like Gabby. If I don't record her music, it'll disappear, and if I let you stop me from doing whatever I have to do to make work, I'll disappear too."

I was crying full bore, with little sniffles and big, wet tears. He reached for his pocket, and I knew he would get out one of his expensive hankies. I hated that it was the second time I'd cried in front of him. I

didn't make crying a habit. I hated it. I found no release in it, just sore eyes and shame. I grabbed his hand before it could leave his pocket. "Don't let my stupid crying get in the way of what you want to say."

"I wanted to say 'blow.'"

"No need." I cleared my throat, tilted my head, and pinched the corners of my eyes. Then I smiled a customer service smile. "See? All done."

He took my wrists and pulled me to him, gathered me up in his lap, and put my arms around his neck. “You think I’d forget you so easily?” he said, his face so close I could see the flecks of blue in his green eyes.

“L.A. is full of pretty girls. You’d find another one.” He started to say something, some petty, pithy reassurance that would make me feel even more insignificant. I put my fingers on his lips

before he could get a word out and whispered, “Shh. Behave.”

He smiled under my hand, then kissed it. “We’re all forgotten. Every one of us. Even artists and rich men. Eventually.”

“My voice could survive.”

“But with what meaning? This moment, here? On this little patio? This makes us who we are, and in a week, it’s going to be a few pieces of memory. In a year...

it's gone, and everything's changed."

"Are you a nihilist, Jonathan?" I stroked the hair on his cheeks as I teased him with my tone.

"I believe in plenty. You, for one. Your loyalty to your friend. The way you took care of her and still take care of her." He kissed my lips and kept his face so close to mine I felt his breath. "Will you let me take care of you?"

"To an extent."

“I want to get someone in to put food in your fridge.”

“No.”

“Your deadbolt is broken. That day when I said the door was unlocked, it wasn’t. I opened the doorknob lock with a credit card. The deadbolt wasn’t even set right.”

“I’ll fix it.”

“I’ll get someone in.” His fingers found their way between my legs again, stroking inside my thighs.

“Jonathan, I put the first one in. I can do it again.”

“Oh, is that why it works so well?” I pursed my lips. He pulled my hand off his cheek and held it. “I’m not questioning your competence, but I don’t think you’re defining yourself by your ability to set in a deadbolt. Or are you going to become L.A.’s first singing locksmith?”

I rested my head on his shoulder. “Fine.

You have someone lock me up tight.”

“On all the doors.” His fingertips found a place between my legs where moisture gathered in response to his touch and his breath.

I sighed. “If it’ll make you happy.”

“It would keep unhappiness at bay.” He dragged his finger up my pussy and across my clit. My breath hitched from the soreness and pleasure. “Open your legs for me.”

“Another go?” I murmured.

“Yes.”

We shifted so my back was to him. He released himself with the clink of a belt buckle and the purr of a zipper. I put my hands on the table as he reached around and pulled my legs farther apart.

“All the way,” he said. “I want you to feel me.” He stretched me apart to the point of pain, then pulled off my robe. Again, I found myself

nude against his clothed body, exposed, vulnerable to him. His dick rolled past my ass and found the source of my wetness. I put my weight on it and groaned with how deep he went, how the soreness stung, and how the skin of my snatch felt abused and loved.

Our hands met between our legs, feeling where we were coupled, taking turns touching my clit, stroking his shaft when it was exposed and

feeling it enter me. I rubbed his balls under his clothes. Our hands went wild, fingers kneading, palms rubbing. He ran his damp hand up my belly and held my breast, twisting the nipple between two fingers. I was crazy with him, a circle of hunger and desire. He pulled me toward him until the back of my head was on his shoulder, and he whispered in my ear, "You are mine, goddess."

I groaned. Close,

wrapped in a web of hands and wetness and throbbing shaft moving inside me.

“Mine,” he said, pressing my hand to where were coupled, his sliding dick against my wet flesh. “This is us together. I own it. This body is my plaything. Your ache is mine. Your orgasm is mine. Your hunger is mine. Your dirty thoughts are mine.”

“I’m going to come.”

“Say it.”

I was so close, but I wanted to say it before I exploded. I turned so my lips were close to his ear. "I'm yours. My pleasure is yours. My wet pussy is yours. You own me, Jonathan. You are the master of my fuck."

"Jesus, you are something else."

He thrust his hips forward. I sat up and matched him thrust for thrust. He moved my hand between my legs, my palm rubbing his dick

and my clit at the same time. It was beautiful, soaking, earthy, celestial, electric. I slammed myself on him, driving him deep as I groaned, grinding my orgasm against the base of his cock, bending my body forward, winding like a spring, and unwinding with a shout.

A few gentle rocks, and I felt his hands tighten on my hips, grabbing flesh and digging in. He'd done it. He'd found the place I

wasn't sore and bruised it, moving me up and down against him with decreasing gentleness.

He groaned, and with a final thrust forward, he yanked my hips down, coming inside me while whispering, "Monica, Monica, Monica."

CHAPTER 11.

JONATHAN

I had a sinking uneasiness. It wasn't necessarily about leaving her for D.C. It was about how often I left and stayed gone. I trusted her intentions, but I didn't trust her ability to make wise decisions. She'd basically admitted Kevin had vengeful thoughts about her, and dismissed them as part of his artistic process.

I wondered if she'd been bitten by a

shithouse rat. If she expected Darren to protect her, she was sorely out of her league. He was a mother hen. He'd tuck her into bed and feed her soup if she got sick, but if that guy started doing the revolting shit I saw in those drawings, Darren was as good as useless.

I didn't feel much more useful.

Mostly because as soon as I hit the 101 and got too far away from her to turn back, I started

planning the next time I'd see her. Nothing between visits occupied my mind. I already wanted to taste her again, feel her legs wrapped around my waist, and hear her sighs. I wanted to take action. Do something. Make some gesture that would bring her closer. Some sort of act that would bind her to me, even when I was away.

I felt greedy thinking about how much I missed her. I wanted more. More time. More

sex. More laughing. I wondered if each of my sisters would like her. How each would react. Five out of seven would love her, and that thought warmed me. The warmth, instead of providing comfort, grew to a painful burn. I'd let my mind wander. I'd let something happen since last night when I kissed her eyelids. She was mine to protect and care for, a responsibility I relished.

CHAPTER 12.

MONICA

Jonathan had left only hours ago, and I'd gone right back to bed. A rumble in the driveway woke me at eight a.m. It sounded like a farting tuba being played in a closet. I peeked out the window. A Ford pickup as long as a bus pulled into my driveway, blocking my car.

I threw on last night's clothes and ran out to the porch. He was obviously in the wrong

driveway. He was right at my door when I opened it. Six four. A solid wall of muscle with a face to match and blonde hair that looked as if it had already done a full day's work.

“Dr. Thorensen is next door,” I said.

“I’m here for the Faulkner residence?”

I looked at his polo. The logo on the breast said The Foundation Guys, and the name DAVE was embroidered above it.

Jonathan said he had guys.

“I wasn’t expecting you so soon,” I said.

“Yeah, well, it’s been slow lately. Anyway, coming to check it out. Get kinda like a bead on the situation?”

“Yeah, well, I gotta get to work. Do you need me?”

“Nope, just your crawlspace. You got a dog or something? Gonna bite me?”

“No, but I’ll bite

you if I'm late to work. I have to get the Honda out."

He laughed and ran to the truck, and I shut myself behind closed doors to get ready. When I got out of the shower, I heard scuffling from Gabby's room. Tiptoeing to the doorway, I found Darren stacking and restacking piles of *Hollywood Reporters*.

"Mon," he said, indicating the towel wrapped around me, "I'm still a man, okay?"

“You could knock.”

“I could if I wanted to sit on your porch for half an hour.”

“Seriously. I have a boyfriend, and you could walk in on God-knows-what.”

“Ah, right. Stay kinky, Monica. Stay kinky,” he said, smiling. I whipped off the towel wrapped around my head and snapped it at him. “New trick?”

I whipped it again, and he grabbed it.

I couldn't get it back because I needed to keep the other towel on myself with my free hand.

“Can you get dressed, please?” Darren threw the towel back.

I ran into my room and heard him through the wall as I wiggled into jeans and a shirt. When I got back to Gabby's room, he was sorting through manila envelopes absently, as if deciding what to do with the whole stack rather than whether or not to

keep any individual file.

“What’s happening with the work crews?” he asked.

“My foundation’s slipping, or actually, *has slipped*.”

“No shit. How you paying to fix that?”

When I didn’t answer, he waved his hand, looking as if he was holding back a torrent of recriminations.

“Can we be done fighting?” I said.

“What fighting? Who’s fighting? The thing

in the parking lot?”

“Yes.”

“I thought that was foreplay.” Though his words were a joke, his voice took a serious timbre.

I felt a shudder that turned to heat on my cheeks. I didn't want him to know. I didn't want anyone to know. He must have imagined me tied up and gagged, like the girl suspended over the bar with wet underpants and come dripping out of her mouth. Would he avoid

making eye contact with me? Would I always think he thought less of me?

I changed the subject, indicating the piles of papers and envelopes. “We should just throw it all out or keep it all. Going through it is just going to make you sad.”

“She spent so much time on this stuff. It feels wrong to just trash it.”

“It doesn’t feel wrong,” I said. “It feels too easy. And like a fast

train to regret.”

“Cheap. Like everything would feel cheap.”

“It’s not the same as throwing *her* away.” I sorted through stacks, not really thinking. Some envelopes were thicker than others. Some had trees and webs of relationships penciled on them. Some were so thin they couldn’t have been more than an idea. “I miss her. I think about her all the time. I should have called her when the

location changed. I shouldn't have made that scratch cut without her. I'm sorry, Darren. I'm so sorry. I feel like I took your sister from you." I couldn't look at him, just the never-ending pile of envelopes left behind as her legacy.

"It wasn't your fault, Monica. It was a stupid accident."

"No, it wasn't. Stop defending me. She committed suicide because she was getting cut out. You know it, and

I know it.”

“No, you *don't*,” he said with a pointed finger and raised voice. “You have two possible scenarios, and you believe the one that makes you responsible? Sorry, no. You want to get beat up during sex, that’s fine, but this emotional masochism is bullshit.”

“She committed suicide whether I take responsibility or not,” I yelled back.

“No. She.

Didn't." Darren ground his teeth. If I took responsibility, he'd have to as well. For not babysitting, for not watching more closely, for not counting her meds. It could go on and on in ever-expanding circles of self-blame.

"Fine," I said. "It was a freak accident. I'm still sorry."

"Me too."

Agreeing on everything and nothing, we looked through the envelopes as if we were

doing more than touching what she'd touched so we could commune with our memories.

“I can take it all back to my place,” he said. “Clear out this room. You need a new roommate.”

I hadn't given that a moment's thought. I'd paid bills like a robot. Since they always came out of my checking account anyway, it didn't feel like anything had changed. But that account wouldn't make it another

month without help.

I realized I didn't want the room cleaned. I didn't want anyone else living there. No one else was family. I didn't want a stitch removed until I was good and ready, which I wasn't yet. "How much are you paying for that place around the corner?"

"Not too much. Why? You want to move in?"

"Live here. With me."

"Here? In this

room?”

“You can have my room. Or the living room. I can clean out the garage.” It seemed like the most sensible thing in the world. We would stay together, which I wanted so much a knife of anxiety went through my chest.

He sorted through files as if he didn't want to look at me. “What would your new boyfriend say?”

“I don't care.”

“Ask first.”

“I don’t have to ask permission to live my life, Darren.”

“It’s not permission. It’s courtesy. Seriously.” He glanced at me. “You and I were intimate, in case you forgot. Guys have a problem with stuff like that. Trust me. I’d like to move in, but not at the expense of whatever you have with him. Not that I understand it.”

“Fine.” I held my hand out, realizing too late my wrists were

black and blue from straining against plastic bags tied to my kitchen cabinets.

“Jesus, Monica,” he whispered.

Before I could even think about it, I hid them behind my back. Stupid. I was the cause of my own shame. “It’s not a big deal.”

He held out his hands. “Can I see?”

“No.”

“Please? I won’t give you a hard time.” When I didn’t move, he

said, “Promise.”

I put my hands in his. He turned my hands over, assessing the damage. I couldn't look at him. I knew what was on his face and what was in his head. It wouldn't be too far off from the truth. Me, naked on the floor. Knees up. Hands tied, straining. Add whatever darkness lay in Darren's imagination, and I'm getting choked, slapped, fisted... whatever act he decided was too sick to perform,

too deranged to even think about, had a shape and a voice and they looked and sounded like me.

“Do we have a problem?” I asked.

He let go of my hands. “It’s not a problem for me if it’s not for you.”

“You sure?”

“Sure? No. But close enough.”

I put my arms around his shoulders and held on for dear life. He rocked me back and forth and gave me a big, hard

kiss on the cheek. I heard another knock on the door and pulled away to go answer. I checked out the window and saw a rock-solid woman in her fifties carrying a beat-up leather case.

“Hi,” I said when I opened the door. “You must be the locksmith.”

“Sure am. Benita’s the name.”

I let her in. “Okay, well, this deadbolt isn’t set in right, so if you could fix that.”

She fiddled with

the lock. “Uh, I was told to replace all the locks with Kleigs.”

My face hardened. I couldn’t afford Kleigs, naturally, but I’d agreed. “I have three doors. Back, front, and side.”

“Done. Checking the windows, too.”

Was there any use arguing? She was just doing her job.

“Fine. I’m going to work. You don’t need me here, do you?”

“Nope, just your

key. I'll leave it and the new ones in a box in the front. Code's 987. All you need to know." She handed me her card, and I saw her eyes widen when she saw my wrists.

I thanked her and ran back to my room. I caught sight of my wrists as I put rings on. That wouldn't work. I looked as though I'd been in a hostage situation. I put bracelets on to cover the bruises. I needed a more solid pair that didn't slide around so much.

Whenever I lifted a tray, the bracelets would slip and reveal my weekend's activities.

Which was exactly what happened. I'd been at work thirty minutes when Debbie noticed. She flicked the bracelets, then looked at me when I got back to the service bar.

"How are you doing?" she asked. I knew exactly what she meant.

"Very well, thank you." I was pretty sure I

blushed as I put empty glasses in the bus tray. She smiled at me then disappeared downstairs.

I serviced some tables, threw snide comments back and forth with Robert, and wore a ridiculous smile that was probably the exact opposite of the customer service smile I usually used. Debbie caught me on a bathroom run and handed me a black velvet bag with a drawstring.

“Put these on.”
She took off as if she had

more important things to do than explain.

When I got to the bathroom, I opened the bag. Inside were two bracelets that were more like metal cuffs in hammered silver. Two inches wide, with red stones set into them, they looked heavy but weren't. When I put them on, they stayed put as I moved my arm.

“Well, there's a hint I can take,” I said to Debbie when I saw her.

“I can't have

customers thinking we tie you up in the basement.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you happy?”

She indicated the bracelets, but I knew she meant the bruises underneath them. “This is good for you?”

Debbie knew Jonathan, and her voice often told me she was some sort of dominant. I knew she knew, if not the details, the broad strokes. “Inappropriate” was too mild a word to describe talking to her about my

relationship with
Jonathan.

“When I’m in the middle of it, it’s very comfortable. But if I think of it any other time, I start to feel like I should be ashamed. As a woman. I’m sorry I’m...” I’d gone too far.

“Don’t be sorry. You are what you are. You don’t have to apologize for it to me or anyone. Especially yourself. And not feminism either. It’ll get along fine with you doing

what you want in private.
Now, get to the floor.”

“Okay.” I ran
back out to do my job.

When I got home
that afternoon, the street
was crowded with
parked cars, and the
foundation guy was still
in my drive. I was stuck.
I found a spot down the
block and walked up the
hill, wishing I'd worn
sneakers. I crossed the
street to my house next to
a green minivan. I lived
on a small block and
knew most of the cars,

but sometimes the odd car parked nearby when the lot at the coffee shop got too crowded. The minivan shouldn't have raised an eyebrow or a hackle. I looked at it anyway. Just a glance. I saw a glass circle enclosed in a larger black one tucked behind the driver-side window, near the side mirror. Must be a trick of the evening light. Why would a camera lens be pointed at my front door?

I peered into the

car. A cord went to the eye of the camera, which looked like a webcam, and a red light blinked at the bottom of the cable.

That was not okay.

What was he trying to do? Make sure I didn't fuck the foundation guy? Check to see if Kevin came around? I stormed across the street, getting madder with each step. A camera was not protecting my health and happiness. It was creepy, stalker bullshit. I got my

new keys out of the
lockbox, then I
remembered who paid
for them.

Fucking great. He
would have gotten the
keys from Benita. I'd
have to call her so she
could take things out so I
could have another
locksmith, who I hired,
put in new tumblers. Pain
in the ass.

I took the
whipped cream out of my
fridge.

Asshole.

I couldn't even

think straight. I was full on white hot rage from my core to my fingertips as I stomped back across the street and sprayed whipped cream all over the minivan's driver's side window.

Let's see what he saw through that. Motherfucker.

As I crossed back to my house, I texted him.

—WTF did you think you were doing with the stalker bullshit

—

Dave, the

foundation guy, stopped me at the sidewalk, wielding a clipboard. “Miss Faulkner? I have an estimate.” I took the clipboard. The number was insane. “Your house is falling down the hill. We need to jack it up and shift it. The whole thing. Then it’s gotta be bolted. It’s a big job.”

I scanned the work list, then the line at the bottom for a signature. “I’m not the homeowner. It’s my mother’s house.”

“Oh.”

“I assume you can’t continue without the homeowner’s signature?”

He looked disappointed. The guy needed work, and I didn’t want to screw him out of it. I read the estimate again. I couldn’t afford the work, but since I found out Dr. Thorensen’s house would meet my house on the day of “the big one,” not getting it fixed was irresponsible.

“I’ll bring this to

my mom to sign and let you know.”

He brightened. I didn't know if I was lying or not. Maybe my mother would shell out the money to protect her property. I could mail her the permits to sign. Or fax them. Or carrier pigeon. Anything to avoid Castaic.

But as God was my witness, I would not let some guy who couldn't trust me, and who put cameras on me, pay to fix my foundation

or change my locks. Oh, fuck no.

My phone rang. Jonathan. I waved to Dave, and he walked to his truck. I answered the phone in a white heat. “I can’t do this,” I said.

“What happened? What are you talking about?” He was in a crowded place full of voices shouting. In my mind, I saw him pressing his finger to his other ear.

“I do not need to be watched. I don’t need you if you can’t trust me.”

He didn't answer. "Say something."

"I just want to make sure you're all right."

"I'm. All. Right."
My voice was tight and firm, pure intention in every syllable.

"I didn't think it was that big a deal."

"Fuck? What? You don't think it's that big... Are you from another planet?" I paced my living room as Dave pulled his truck out of my driveway.

“Monica, calm down.”

“Calm... What? No! I will not calm down. This is serious. This is a problem. And you know what? I don’t have time for it. I don’t have time to describe to you proper boundaries outside the bedroom.”

“You’re out of line.”

“Don’t you use that voice with me now. *You’re* out of line.”

“Monica.”

“Jonathan.”

“I’m coming over
there.”

“Don’t bother.”
I hung up.

CHAPTER 13.

MONICA

I wanted to run. I wanted to somehow foil his stupid fucking plan to come over and soothe the common sense right out of me. But I had to shower and change to play at Frontage. Rhee and I had agreed to continue on a trial run, and I wanted to be my best, not all screwed up. When I got out of the shower, my phone was ringing. I picked it up without looking, thinking

it was Jonathan.

“My doors are locked.”

“Okay?”

Fuck, not Jonathan. The caller ID identified the caller as Jerry, the producer I’d done a scratch cut with two weeks earlier.

“Hi, sorry. Thought you were someone else. How’s it going?”

“Good, I’m having drinks with Eddie Milpas tonight. He’s one of our acquisitions guys.

You playing that dinner club?"

"Frontage, yeah."

"You playing the song we cut?"

"I don't usually play my own stuff. I can ask."

"Do it. He's looking for something, and I think you have it."

My heart raced.
"Thanks. I'll see you tonight."

"Great. Keep the doors locked."

I hung up. It had been twenty minutes

since Jonathan called. I
stuffed my crap in a bag
and ran out with my hair
still wet.

CHAPTER 14.

JONATHAN

“Lil.” I knocked on the window. “Forget Sheila. Take me to Echo Park.”

“Yes, sir.”

Turning around was no small feat. She had to crawl off the exit of the 134, crawl back on, and sit in rush hour traffic. Dinner with my favorite sister and attendant children was officially cancelled.

When I got to Monica’s house, she and

her car were gone. I stood on the porch calculating my next move. She'd said something about a gig at Frontage, and I was tempted to go over there. I saw Dave pulling up the hill in his dually.

“Hey, Jon. The lady of the house home? I had a few more permits to pull.”

“Nope. What happened today?”

He leaned out his window and offered me a fry from a McDonald's

bag, which I refused.
“What do you mean?”

“Did you say something about watching her?”

“No, man, I was watching, not telling.”

“When I said to keep an eye on her, it was a casual keeping an eye. Because she knows, and she’s pissed.”

“Sorry. I didn’t say anything. She did tag up that car with whipped cream. Don’t know what that was about.” He craned his neck to see the

other side of the street.
“Right there.”

I followed his gaze to a green minivan. I got a sinking feeling as I walked toward it. The whipped cream wasn't just whipped cream. It was the kind from a can, and Monica was sending me a message.

I used my hankie to wipe the whipped cream away and saw a camera behind the glass.

Ah. She thought I did that. The thought had crossed my mind, but I

did have boundaries.

And then the other question: who did it? Who wanted her watched?

I said good-bye to Dave and crawled back into the Bentley. “Lil, take me home.” I needed my car, and Lil had been driving all day. Monica would be trapped behind that piano. I could still make it.

CHAPTER 15.

MONICA

“One song,” I said to Rhee. “The rest can be the same as we’ve always done.”

She chewed the inside of her lip, glancing around the room. It was already getting crowded. “What’s it sound like?”

“Like a woman on the piano,” I said. “Here are the lyrics.”

Asking permission to sing my own songs wasn’t something I would have

accepted a month ago, but so much had happened, and I depended on the job at Frontage to keep Gabby's memory alive.

The lyrics made me nervous, but I had to do it, just once. If I didn't take opportunities when they presented themselves, they'd dry up.

“Little hardcore, sugar,” Rhee said. “Collar? Licking the floor?”

“It's metaphorical.”

“I figured that.”

Of course she did. What woman would have to lay that out for a man literally?

“It’s important to me,” I said. “Someone’s coming to hear it. A producer and a record exec. And the composition, Gabby wrote it. I laid the lyrics over after...”

“Okay, okay.” She handed back the sheet. “You’re fine. Have fun. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Rhee.” I

dashed back to the dressing room. I'd played for Rhee earlier in the week to prove I could manage lyrics and music at the same time. I was only halfway into "Under My Skin" when she stopped me and told me I was fine to go back on my old schedule. I was happy for the distraction, but the feeling that Eugene Testarossa had been right, and Gabby had been redundant, nagged at the back of my mind. Some little guilt-

inducing voice insisted that by playing her part, I was driving her deeper into the grave.

The dressing room was like a second home anymore, but it was lonely and my anger at Jonathan wasn't good company. I put on my makeup and hummed my new song. When it was time to go into the dining room, I looked at myself in the mirror and said, "I hope you get carpal tunnel and a frog jumps down your throat."

It wasn't the
same, but it was the best I
had.

JONATHAN

Nothing moved. The Jag was caught between a bus and a silver SUV. I should have brought the bike. I could have gone between the lanes and been there already. Even though I knew she wasn't going anywhere, I wanted to see Monica right away. Had to. First, she was angry with me, and that fact bored a hole right through me. The more I thought about it, the more

I wanted to rush to her. Second, the surveillance equipment across the street just turned the dial up on my concern. That equipment wasn't a joke. Someone was watching her. I didn't know why, or who, but I could buy those answers with money and time. One, I had plenty of. The other, I'd have to manufacture.

“Margie,” I said when my oldest sister picked up her phone. She was fifteen years my senior and had been more

of an aunt to me. Her law firm had a huge criminal litigation division and billed thousands of hours keeping celebrities from going to jail.

“Jonny, you never call anymore.”

“Because I don’t have any problems.”

“But tonight? You have a problem?”

“Are you sitting?”

Western Avenue opened up just as I had to turn down Santa Monica Boulevard. Too bad all the money in the world

wouldn't buy me a flying
fucking car.

“Sure, I’m
sitting.”

“There’s a
woman.”

“You just gave me
a migraine. That poor
girl. What did you do to
her?”

I’d squirmed
when she litigated my
divorce and I had to tell
her it was about sex;
what kind of sex and how
I’d been rebuffed. She
needed details and
received them only after

I'd drunk half a bottle of scotch.

"It's not that," I said. "She and I, we're good. It's something else."

"Where does one find a woman who likes —"

"Enough." I knew all the wisecracks already. "I'm not in the mood, Margie. I found a camera outside her place. Temporary surveillance inside a car. I need her house swept for more. I think you might know

someone who could do it.”

“Do you have access?”

“No, and irony of ironies, I just had new locks put in.”

“You’re not doing that controlling thing again, are you, Jonny?”

“Just round people up and I’ll get you access. Okay?”

“*She* might like it when you’re bossy—”

I hung up. My sisters knowing I had a kinky streak wasn’t easy.

Another thing I could thank Jessica for.

I got Hank on the phone at the next red light.

“Jaydee.”

“Did you burn those drawings?”

“Not yet.”

“Can you pack them up and have them to my Wilshire office tomorrow morning?” I asked.

“You want them packed to archiving standards?”

“No. Put them in

an envelope. No more. I'll let you know how to proceed." I hung up.

I was sure it was Kevin. He'd been at the funeral and could have planted cameras then. Video of Monica entering and exiting the house would be perfect for an installation, especially with her music over it. Another homage to a breakup. He knew her well enough to know that once he presented her with the footage in the completed work, she'd

buckle and let it happen for the sake of art and her career. Or he'd neglect to mention it until the show was installed. She'd be even less likely to gripe since her name would be on the thing already. A humiliating stab in the back. If there were cameras inside the house, I would have to kill him.

I felt as if every cell in my body needed to be near Monica. To protect her from whoever watched her and to soothe her anger at me. I

just had to brave the traffic and the ridiculous synchronization of the lights on Santa Monica Boulevard.

CHAPTER 17.

MONICA

With Gabby gone and the promotional machine at a standstill, the room's body count went back to normal. It was the same-sized crowd as the first night we'd played: just tables and a few people waiting at the bar. Any buzz we'd had about our shows died with Gabby. Basically, I was starting from scratch, which was fine. I didn't think I could take much more than that without

her to lean on.

The table by the warm speaker had a RESERVED sign. Jerry and Eddie were meant to sit there, if they came at all. I said hello to some lovely couples by the front and asked if they had any requests, which I'd play if I knew. A group of frat boys had heard about me and come for dinner. They were half drunk already, and their appetizers hadn't even arrived, so I didn't linger. I made a last

visual sweep around the room and cast my eyes to Rhee. She was leading two women to a table in the corner. I recognized both of them. One was Jonathan's sister Deirdre. One was his ex-wife.

My skin burst into tingles and my throat closed. I couldn't feel my fingertips. Then I remembered I was playing that song. Jonathan's song. I hadn't shown it to him or told him about it yet. Jessica would hear it. And she

would know.

She would *know*.

I wasn't ashamed of what I was doing with Jonathan, but letting her hear my fears as if I'd whispered them in her ear was sickeningly intimate. A cold trickle of regret ran down my back. I should never have made the thing, never written it down, never set it to Gabby's music. Though I wasn't hiding it from Jonathan, at the very least, I should have shown it to him before

playing it publicly. I hadn't even thought of that.

I sat down at the piano and touched the keys. No, I'd skip it. Play something else. Jerry wasn't there, so no one would be the wiser. Rhee didn't really care. I started playing. Yes, I'd hide behind Irving Berlin, then Cole Porter. I'd stay safe. I'd still paint them the colors of Jonathan. I'd still feed them his lust, his touch, his voice. But Jessica

would never hear it because I was protected by dead men's lyrics.

I was coming off "Someone to Watch Over Me," the middle of my set, when I saw Jerry with two men at the bar. He tipped his glass to me. They weren't sitting at the table. Stopping by, maybe? Well, shit. I'd have to play it.

With the lights in my face, blinding me to half the room, Jessica didn't loom as large. After warming up with

the standards I knew so well and hiding behind that shiny, black baby grand, I didn't feel as vulnerable. I could play that song.

I could do it. I could belt it out. Fuck her. Fuck her to Sunday. Fuck her with the lights on. Fuck her fuck her fuck her. It was my room. My song. My audience. My rules.

Rule number one?
Fuck her.

I hit the keys, owning them, and I

launched into Jonathan's
song as though he was
naked and I was jumping
him.

*We wove words
under Popsicle trees,
The ceiling open
to the sky,*

*And you want to
own me*

*With your fatal
grace and charmed
words.*

*All I own is a
handful of stars*

*Tethered to a bag
of marbles that turns*

Oh, her ears
would burn off at the
mention of Popsicle trees
and a ceiling open to the
stars but guess what?

Fuck her.

My questions and
fears were pregnant with
heated longing, a desire
for encouraging answers,
begging for appeasement.
My list of acceptable and
unacceptable behaviors
became a list of exciting
possibilities.

Will you call me

whore?

*Destroy me,
Make me lick the
floor,*

*Twist me in
knots,*

*Turn me into an
animal?*

*Will I be a vessel
for you?*

*Slice open our
lying box*

*Through a low
doorway for our*

*Shoulds and
oughts.*

Choose the

*things I don't need,
No careless
moments, no mystery.
And you need
nothing.
My backward
bend doesn't feed.*

And just to call to
her, just because she'd
hurt me, and just because
I could, I changed the last
chorus on the fly, turning
questions into statements.

*I will own you.
Tie you.
I will collar you*

*Hurt you,
Hold you, and
take you.*

*You will be a
vessel for me.*

For all my inner ferocity, the song had to complement the rest of the set, so I didn't scream or wail. I didn't hit the top of my range, but the ragged emotion was there as I hit the last note at low, dinnertime volume. A whisper even. I moved right into "Stormy Weather." The lights

blacked out for half a second. Jerry and his buddies were leaving, blocking the spots. I felt a core of relief. I didn't think I could deal with managing them and Jessica.

I finished my set, thanked my audience, looked humbled for the applause, and strode back to the dressing room with my chin up. I didn't start shaking until I got the door closed and locked. My breath became ragged and my

eyes filled. Jesus, fuck, what was she doing there? With Deirdre? Who was going for gold in the family Olympics, for fuck's sake? God damn it. Which lie was incoming? Which bomb would she drop? I would stay in the dressing room. I'd tell Rhee I was too upset about Gabby to do the good-byes, and I'd stay in there until the bar closed.

That actually seemed like a viable plan, but when I scrolled

through my contacts so I could text Rhee an apology, I slid past Debbie's number. Her words came back to me as if whispered in my ear.

Be a woman of grace.

Yeah.

Maybe it was time to grow up. Maybe if I knew I wasn't doing anything wrong and if I stood by my right to be with any man I liked, I didn't have a reason to hide in a filthy dressing

room.

I texted Rhee.

*—I'm a little
upset about Gabby—*

She got right back
with a bloop.

*—Can I do
anything?—*

*—If you could
bring back two
Jameson's? One shot
and one on the rocks for
my nerves? And I'll be
out right after—*

—Sure sugar—

I straightened my
dress, wiped mascara
from under my eyes, and

reapplied my lipstick. A waitress came. I cracked the door to thank her for the drinks and remove them from her tray.

Once the door closed, I knocked back the shot. The other one was my prop. I looked in the mirror and tried out my customer service smile. Awesome. I was just smashing. And fuck her.

I went out to do my job. I entered the room and said a few hellos, smiling and

graciously accepting compliments. Deirdre was at the bar. Jessica was alone at the table, half paying attention to her phone and half pretending she didn't see me.

I went to the bar and squeezed next to Deirdre. "Hi, I think we've met," I said.

She was more polite than before and nodded, a noncommittal smile playing at her lips. "Yeah. Nice singing." She tucked a strand of

tight curls behind her ear.
They bounced right out.

“Thanks. I, uh, I don’t want to launch into this and be rude, but I couldn’t help but notice you came with someone?”

“Yeah. She’s family. She wanted to see you. I knew where you were, so...” She ended with a shrug.

“She’s borderline malevolent.”

“She’s my brother’s wife.”

“Not anymore.”

“You have a lot to learn.” She tried to put the hair behind her ear again, but it sprang in front of her eyes.

I took a deep breath. She was one of seven, and I was alienating her. “I’m sorry. I just don’t understand.”

She considered me deeply. There was something about her, some sadness, a touch of melancholy. She had a deep spring of sorrow. I saw it in her eyes and the way she fought a losing

battle with the strand of hair that wouldn't tuck behind her ear. "Like I said. Family. A man is meant to marry one woman. One life, one wife."

I wondered for a second if Deirdre lived in the twenty-first century, then I saw her crucifix necklace. I got it then. She was saving Jonathan's soul by serving Jessica.

"All right," I said. "I'll go say hello. You walking over there?"

“In a minute.” She smiled at me. I couldn’t read it. Besides the spring of sadness, I couldn’t read Deirdre at all.

Jessica pretended to see me for the first time when I was halfway to her. Quelling a tidal wave of hatred that would surely overcome even the power of my customer service smile, I sat at the edge of her booth. We were equals. I wouldn’t stand over her as if I was her waitress.

“Nice to see you again,” I lied.

“Same here,” she lied back. “You play beautifully.”

“Thank you.”

“And your voice is heavenly. You’re an artist.”

I put my elbows on the table and fondled my glass of whiskey. “Is there something you want? Being here? Because I do believe in the odd coincidence, but not this one.” I was all smiles. If Rhee saw me,

she'd assume I was making friends with a customer.

Jessica looked down at her own drink, a half empty clearish-brownish thing with soda and lime. "You played a song in the middle I didn't recognize. I mean, let me correct myself. I did recognize it. I asked myself many of the same questions."

"Were you as honest with yourself as you were with me?"

A smirk played at

her lips. "I deserve that."

I could have pounced, but I didn't. She wasn't there to get beat up. She wasn't there to apologize, and she certainly didn't come to see me sing. She came to get Jonathan back. As far as I was concerned, I was pissed as hell at him, but I hadn't decided I was finished with him. So I stayed silent, waiting for her to explain. She didn't move a muscle unnecessarily. Her face gave away

nothing. She didn't twitch or fondle a glass like I did, and she didn't have a customer service smile. She had an expression that went deeper. It was more practiced, more ingrained. She had the grace Debbie tried to instill in me. In spades.

“There will come a day when you want to talk to someone.” She reached into her bag and took out a card. “Someone who knows more about who you're involved with. If you can

forgive the little joke I played on you, you can contact me. We can talk.”

She slid the card to me. It was a plain, matte, white business card with her name, number, and an address in the industrial part of Culver City.

It was so wildly classy I resented her all over again. I slipped it into the pocket of my dress. “If I have something to ask, I can just go to Jonathan, don’t you think?”

She sipped her drink. “Has he told you about Rachel?”

“Yes.”

“Everything?”

“I can’t prove a negative. Neither can you. And if you think I’m repeating what he told me so that you can cross-check it... well, that says more about you than it does about me, doesn’t it?”

“Your hostility does the same.” I felt slapped, and I shouldn’t have. She barely moved a

muscle or changed her expression, adding to my feelings of inadequacy. “There are a lot of moving parts here, and if I may be honest, you’re out of your depth.”

I rolled my glass between my palms, cooling them, thinking of Jonathan’s porch on our first night together and how he’d used his glass and the ice in it. The shot had loosened me, reducing my stress and inhibitions. I’d walked minefields like Jessica’s

before. Unfortunately, I always forgot my map. “So what you’re telling me is you want to help me stay away from your ex-husband, whose heart you broke? No, I don’t think so.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Oh, yes, it is.”

“Things have been put in motion. I wanted to warn you away, so you don’t get hurt.”

I didn’t like threats, especially vague

ones. They implied the person making the threat didn't respect me enough to explicate, and that was guaranteed to twist my knickers in a knot. I tried to keep my game face on. "I'd understand if you just wanted him back, but you want something else."

"Right now, I'm trying to get you out of harm's way. I'll be happy to explain but not here."

Oh, that was a sneaky trick. I wouldn't touch it. Wouldn't

believe it. Why would she have my best interests at heart? I thrust myself forward. She didn't balk. "He has one dick, and it can be inside one woman at a time. Nothing you say will stop me getting peeled off the ceiling every time he puts that astonishing cock in me. If you miss it badly, if you imagine it when your new man's on top of you, if you think about it when you're alone with your hands under the sheets, I understand

completely. He's a monster fuck, Mrs. Drazen, and you're going to have to go through me to get him back."

Through the slight smile spread over her face, she practically whispered, "You're a class act." I tried not to react. I tried to be implacable and cold, and I knew, as sure as it never snows in Los Angeles, that I failed. My face was lemon Jell-O held up by toothpicks. Jessica pushed her glass

away and stood. “I’m sure your refinement will keep the astonishing gentleman coming back for more.”

Lemon Jell-O
turned to cherry, and if there was a deeper shade of red to turn, I had no idea what flavor it was. She looked over my head and smiled. “Jon, how are you?”

His voice came from over my shoulder like a warm sweater, fresh from the dryer on a cold night. “Fine,

Jessica.”

My plan had been to rail at him, to throw rage his way. To let him know he couldn't have me watched. I had boundaries even if he didn't, and I didn't like being stalked. But when he put his hand on the back of my neck as if he owned me, I was awash in gratitude. It was the best possible comeback to Jessica's jab about my lack of refinement, and I didn't have to say a word.

Jessica said, “I was just having a word with Monica about her song. It made me think of you. Deirdre, honey, you all right?”

Deirdre had entered the circle, still tucking her stubborn red curl behind her ear. “Yeah.” She turned to Jonathan and punched his arm. “Hey, man.”

“I hope you’re getting a lift home, Dee. Monica and I are leaving.” He looked at his ex-wife. “Jess, I don’t

know what you were doing here, but I'm dispensing with all the niceties and saying good-bye." He squeezed my neck and looked down at me. "You ready?"

"My stuff's in the dressing room."

"Let's go, then." He held out his hand and I took it, sliding from the booth as he helped me up.

I walked to the back without saying good-bye, pulling him along. I didn't start

shaking until we were both behind the dressing room door. Before I could even flick on the light, he pushed me against the wall, his mouth on mine, pressing my head to the plaster.

“Jonathan,” I gasped. Didn’t I want to yell at him? Wasn’t I mad about something? I knew I had things to say.

He kissed my neck and stroked my breast through my dress. “The camera. Not mine. I asked Dave to keep an

eye on you is all.” He pressed his club of a cock against me.

Fuck it. Fuck explanations. Fuck boundaries. Whatever he said was good enough for me if it let him take me right then.

With both hands under my skirt, he kneaded my ass as he kissed me. His finger looped in the crotch of my fancy Bordelle panties and yanked them. I pulled one leg out, and he draped it over his hip,

opening me to him. He taunted my nipple through my dress, drawing his thumbnail against it before putting his whole hand over my breast.

I undid his pants and released him. He put one hand on my chest, leaning into me, and he used the other to guide himself in me, which he did with a hard, fast thrust.

Eyelids half-mast with pleasure, he thrust again, even harder. I squeaked when his dick

hit the end of me. He put my other leg over his hip so I was wrapped around him. He leveraged me against the wall with his body, a fulcrum where we were joined, the base of all that held us together.

I put my hands on his face, and he took them off, holding them down.

“You ready, goddess?”

“Take me.”

He grunted as he pushed hard, getting so deep it hurt. Without a

moment's hesitation, he pounded me again, forcing me against the wall as if he wanted to punch through it. Again and again he took me, hard and fast, pushing into a tingling warmth, forcing pleasure to current through me, the base of his cock slamming my clit over and over.

“Look at me,” he demanded in a husky voice. I did, though my hair was falling into my eyes. My breath was

timed to his thrusts. “You talk to me, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I could barely understand myself.

“Never shut me out.”

“Never. Oh, God. Jonathan. My king.”

“Don’t come, Monica.” He slowed down, angling himself differently so I felt him inside me, deep, hard, deliberate. “Don’t let your emotions get the best of you. Talk. To. Me.” He thrust with

every word, sending me into a place where verbalization was nearly impossible.

“Yes.”

“What do you want to say?” he asked.

“Let me come?”

“No. What else?”

He slammed into me and ground against me, pushing all the way in, his face by mine, his scent of leather and earth and clean laundry overtaking me. “Why did you shut me out?”

“I’m scared. You

scare me.”

He cupped my cheek. “Why?”

The room wasn’t well lit, but I saw the green in his eyes where the lights from the parking lot cut through the window blinds. “You can hurt me, Jonathan. You can do damage.”

He stroked my bottom lip with his thumb. “Your honesty is beautiful.” He pulled out and pushed into me again, jamming himself against my wide-open sex.

“Again, please,” I begged.

He thrust into me again. And again, until I thought I’d explode from the crotch out in a spray of screams. My breath got raspy and hard, my chest hurt with the effort to move air through my body when I wanted to stop breathing completely. He put his hand over my mouth and took me fast and hard. I came, crying out into his palm. He put his chest to mine, his cheek against

my face, and with a long groan, he filled me, jerking and rocking. I felt his warm breath on my neck, his hand sliding down my sweat-coated face, whispering my name. We leaned against each other for a minute, breathing together, until he kissed my cheek.

“You’re staying with me tonight, at least,” he said softly.

“Why?”

He kissed my mouth again and said, “Your house and your car

need to be swept for cameras. I can't let you go back there until it's clean."

"What if whoever put that there was really after you? How do you know your house isn't full of cameras?"

"It's getting checked right now."

We kissed as he pulled out of me. He let my legs down. I was still short of breath, still sensitive between my thighs. My lips hurt where his late-day scruff

had rubbed me, and my spine ached from being pushed into a brick wall. As usual, I felt as if I'd been beaten near death with a fuckstick.

Jonathan kneeled before me and helped me get my lacy underpants back on, kissing a trail up my leg. When he'd straightened my dress, he kissed me.

“We have to talk,” I said.

“About Jessica. What did she say?”

“About that, and

—”

There was a loud knock on the door. The handle jiggled. “Monica,” Rhee called, “you in there?”

“Yes.”

“Bernie’s here.” Bernie was the guy who played after me.

“Out in a second.”

I hoisted my bag. Jonathan ran his fingers through his hair and took it from me. We got outside into the crisp, autumn night. The valet

went for Jonathan's car. Mine was parked on the street. He walked me to it, our fingers linked. "People are waiting at your house to sweep it for cameras and mikes."

"This is so weird."

He held my chin when we stopped by my car. "It's probably nothing. We need to go there so you can let them in." He put his arms around my waist. "You, darling, will gather clothes and things. Then I

shall bring you back to my bed, and I will have you again. And maybe again.”

“We have to have an unpleasant conversation.”

“Do you believe I’m not spying on you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you fuck someone else?”

“God, no!”

“Are you leaving me because I interrupted your work?”

“No.”

“Are you leaving

me at all?”

“No, Jonathan,
really—”

“Then I fail to see
the urgency. Let’s take
care of business and let
unpleasantness take care
of itself.”

CHAPTER 18.

JONATHAN

I didn't want to hear a word about what my ex-wife said. I didn't want to navigate her labyrinth of lies and half-truths, and I didn't want to explain anything to Monica while my mind was on Kevin and the cameras. We needed to hand off keys, pack her for the night, and get her into my bed. Then I would explain or fuck away whatever Jessica told her. Jessica was

going to the mat. I couldn't deal with her shit for another minute. Her worst nightmare was seeing me happy, apparently, because I hadn't seen her as much in the past half year as I'd seen her in the past month.

I got to Echo Park first and parked across the street from Monica's house. The green minivan was gone, replaced by a black van. Margie's guys. I walked up to her chain-link gate. A man greeted

me. Late twenties. Suit and tie. Pinkie ring. My eyes adjusted and I saw two others shaking the bushes.

“Jonathan Drazen?” he said, holding out his hand.

“The same.” I shook it.

“Name’s Will Santon. You look exactly like Margie.”

“Tell her she looks younger.”

He smiled at me.
“This place yours?”

“Girlfriend.”

“We found a wireless minicam on the porch. Not the best, but good enough. Middle-class work.”

The porch. What had we done on the porch? Anything? My mind was a blank. I was blinded by the lights of a little black Honda tearing up the hill and into the driveway.

“Don’t tell her,” I said. “Let me take care of it.”

Monica got out, all legs and hair, looking

like a force of nature, a wild animal entitled to her own sovereignty. Her sexuality wasn't coy or cute. She wasn't saucy; she was feral. Her very presence on the earth stirred me.

“Hi,” she said, smiling.

Santon smiled back at her. “Miss, is this your house?”

“I live here.”

“I'm Will Santon. I'm a licensed private investigator in the state of California.” He showed

her an ID card. She looked at it, back at him, and back down to the card. “I’ve been hired by the law firm of Bode, Drazen, and Weinstein to check your house for surveillance devices. Do I have your permission to enter?”

She glanced at me. I nodded.

“Yes.” She flicked her keys and headed in. We followed her, a line of four suits. The other two fanned out, glancing at everything, as

Santon gave Monica papers to sign. I stood behind her and prayed that whoever watched her did so only from the outside. If they got inside, I would have the strong urge to burn the place down.

Finished with Santon, Monica turned to me and whispered, "I'm uncomfortable."

I kissed her forehead. "Go get your toothbrush and whatever, and we'll get out of here."

CHAPTER 19.

MONICA

I found a bag in the closet and threw it on the bed. My drawers were a mess. My closet was even worse. I took whatever I touched first and threw it on top of the bag. I needed work clothes and after-work clothes. Shoes. Underwear. Lacy Jonathan shit seemed absurd. Would his rule still stand? Garter belts and stockings felt frivolous and ridiculous

with men in my house looking for cameras and microphones.

I threw both options on the bag. From the bathroom, I got makeup, a hairbrush, ties for braids, and my toothbrush. I was sure I was forgetting something, but I wanted out of there. I'd buy whatever else I needed.

I stuffed everything in the bag and picked it up. It had covered something: a manila envelope labeled

Jonathan S Drazen III in Sharpie. One of Gabby's files. Darren must have found it and left it for me. I picked it up. There was enough inside to give it some heft, but it wasn't as big as the envelopes she'd created for people in the music industry. Twenty pages, tops. Probably a bunch of friends highlighted in orange and family in yellow. Jessica in pink. The corners were curled and the color faded. I almost slipped it in the

bag. But no, I wouldn't bring it to his house. That was crazy.

“How you coming?” Jonathan leaned in the doorway, his jacket falling on his shoulders in a perfect expression of some kind of victory over gravity. Over everything. If owning a doorway just by standing in it was possible, or beating the shit out of a space by existing within it, he did. His concern over what was happening in my

house had a physical presence. It emanated from him in a dense aura of worry, making him seem bigger, more present, more powerful. I was suffocating under the weight of it.

I glanced down at the envelope. His name faced down. “Thirty seconds or less,” I said. He didn’t move, making me nervous. “Shoo. Girl stuff.”

He slipped out of the doorway, and I breathed again. I slipped

the envelope into my top drawer, slung the bag over my shoulder, and walked out of my room with my head down.

CHAPTER 20.

MONICA

Telling him about my conversation with Jessica, and the song, weighed heavily on me. I couldn't think about much else. I couldn't do it in a neutral space. I couldn't just tell him and walk out. It was late. My house was overrun.

Jonathan put his hand on my thigh as his other hand rested on the steering wheel. "They're going to be out of there by tonight."

“Yeah. It’s a small house. Yours took how long?”

“Couple of hours.”

I looked out the window. I still felt invaded. “If there’s nothing there, you’re in trouble for making a big deal about it.”

“We’ll work out a suitable punishment.” He didn’t look as though he expected to be punished, though. He looked as though he was placating me. I didn’t care for it. I

would have given anything for it to be yesterday again.

We waited as the gate opened. It seemed to take forever, rumbling and clacking in a way I didn't remember it doing before. When Jonathan took my hand and looked at me, he seemed tired. Gorgeous and powerful as always, but wrung out.

"I don't want you to worry," he said.

I squeezed his hand. "I'm fine."

"But I want you to

think about who might have done this.”

“Something tells me you have an idea.”

He didn't say, but I knew he thought it was Kevin. The fact that Kevin had nothing to gain from watching me notwithstanding, anything evil in my life, and stalking me was truly evil, could only be one person's responsibility. Career going poorly? Kevin. Art show hits a snag? Kevin. Bad day at work? Kevin. Camera

trained on my front porch? Kevin.

When we got inside, he dropped my bag and put his arms around me. I rested my head on his shoulder. We rocked together, entwined, fitting together like puzzle pieces. He kissed my cheek, my jaw. A tingle of heat pooled between my legs. I looked up, giving him access to my neck. He was going to take me again, and it would be slow and sweet and

generous. His hands worked up my back, and I put my fingers in his hair as he kissed my shoulder.

My body screamed for him. Just once. Before telling him anything about Frontage. Just a little bit of comfort. Just to be enveloped inside him. I didn't need a fuck. I needed to make love, and the way he touched me showed me he understood.

“Jonathan.”

“Monica.”

“Wait.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“You’re mine.”

“Tangerine.”

He stopped and stood back, looking me in the eye. His hair was mussed, and his eyes hooded with heat. “Okay, little goddess. What is it?”

“I have to tell you things. I can’t put it off anymore.”

“All right. Let’s get some fresh air.” He took my hand and walked

me out to the backyard.

We sat on the outdoor couch, in the near dark, which I appreciated. I didn't want a bright light shining on our conversation. His hands stayed on me, stroking my palm, my thigh, soothing me.

“So, you saw Jessica there tonight,” I said. “I don't have to tell you that part.”

“Yes.”

“And you saw us talking.”

“Yes.”

“She gave me her card and offered to tell me everything about you.” His expression didn’t change. “I said ‘no, thank you, if I need to know about Jonathan, I’ll ask him.’”

He squeezed my hand. “You’re perfect.”

“Well, maybe not. She asked if you told me about Rachel, and I said yes. She asked if you told me all of it, and I kind of went off on her.”

“Really?”

“I told her I didn’t know what she wanted, but she couldn’t have you back because you were too good in bed.”

He laughed good and hard, throwing his head back and showing the night sky his face. His laughter filled the huge yard, and even I smiled a little, because really, what man could be upset at that? I wanted to end the conversation right there. If I crawled into his lap, he’d put his arms

around me, take me upstairs, and we'd make love so sweetly. Just the thought of it made my arms tingle.

“I haven't gotten to the really uncomfortable stuff yet.”

He wiped the tears from his eyes and leaned back, smiling, totally relaxed, his arm draped over the back of the couch. “Go ahead, then.”

“You really are good in bed, you know.”

“Thank you. It

takes two.”

“Right. Okay. There’s a song.” I said the last sentence as if I’d jumped off a cliff. *There’s a song.* Three words, and I was committed to finishing. I stared into my lap. I couldn’t look at him. “Jessica heard it.” I cleared my throat. “I wrote it after you called me submissive and before I gave you the list.” I glanced at him. His smile was gone. “I recorded it as a scratch

cut, which is something passed around the industry as a sample. I hadn't written a song in a while, and it was all I had. So, it came out good. One of the acquisitions guys heard it and wanted to hear me sing it. They came tonight."

"What was his name? The acquisitions guy?"

"Eddie something." Jonathan's eyes closed slowly, and his mouth shut tight.

“What?” I asked.

“Let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“The fucking
song.”

My heart beat so hard my ribs were going to break. My lungs quivered, filled, and seemed to empty only part way. I didn’t have an instrument to hide behind or a piece of paper with my requirements for him to read. I just had two minutes of pure, raw, fucking vulnerability in his backyard while he

pondered not only what he thought of the song, but me, what he felt about me, what his ex-wife heard, and what *she* thought.

“It doesn’t have a title yet.”

“The song, Monica.” His voice was like a brick, blunt and hard, without nuance. He waited. I didn’t know what he was thinking, but I realized the more time I took to start, the more crap would run through his head, and maybe that

wasn't a good thing.

I sang it in my soft, jazzy voice. I didn't look at him because I didn't want to see his reaction. I just wanted to get through it. I started to crack in the last bridge, where I asked if I'd do the things to him he did to me, because the questions weren't about sex anymore. The song revealed too much. Fuck. I hated music right then, as I sang the last line. I wished I'd never heard a note.

His face was in his hands, and his elbows were on his knees. “What were you thinking?”

“About you.”

He looked up. “When you *recorded* it? What the fuck were you thinking?”

I couldn’t answer. I had been thinking about myself. That it could be an opportunity. That it was a good song, and once it was a song, it was mine, no matter what it was about.

Even in the dark,

his face frightened me. I'd seen that expression before. On my father, just before he threw something or tore apart the living room drapes.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I'm glad you're sorry. But what are you sorry for? Exactly? Are you sorry you had to tell me or sorry you were so selfish in the first place? Because it's not about you. It's about *us*, and we're not a big secret. Unless we split

tomorrow, that song is about me and it will follow me wherever I go. Fuck, Monica, I know you're ambitious. I don't expect any less. What I didn't expect was that you'd do something so stupidly self-centered."

Even though we were outside, I felt as if a box closed in around me. If he'd been wrong or if I had a leg to stand on, the box might not have felt as though it was filling with water and I was three seconds from drowning.

But I had done wrong. I didn't realize it when I first recorded the song, but I knew it when I played it in front of Jessica. I'd chosen my ambition over my respect for him, and there was no denying it.

His expression was impassive, walled off. The box filled further, and I felt not only trapped, but alone and scared. If he said another word, I would lose my shit.

“Okay, I get it,” I

said before walking back
into the house.

CHAPTER 21 .

JONATHAN

When the screen door slammed behind her, I kicked over the glass-topped coffee table. It shattered. I considered doing more violence to the furniture, but I wasn't angry at the furniture. I was angry at myself. I had no business feeling what I felt for Monica. I had no business getting involved in a kinky, emotionally charged relationship with an unpracticed

submissive. Stupid. This, I'd earned.

When I'd held Jessica's hands down during sex, she told everyone I wanted to rape her. One slap on the ass, and I was an abuser. It hurt badly enough when she called me those things to my face. When she did it behind my back, it was worse. Later, I realized she'd had a rough time with men before me. I should have been more understanding, but it

wasn't like I didn't have my own shit.

When Monica sang her song in the husky voice of a fallen angel, I knew her intentions were pure. I also knew the results would suck. Enough of our social circle hated me already. Who knew what or whom her performance would affect. My business? My family? The possible repercussions came in flaming scenes of scorn and derision. Lost deals. Uncomfortable dinners,

come-ons from the wrong women, bruised ribs from jocular elbows of men thinking Monica was my whore, or worse, available to share.

Jessica had added humiliation to my confusion by confiding in our whole social circle and enough of my family to make Easter dinner a nightmare. I never dug out of it, and the song could just bury me further in a reputation I didn't earn and didn't want. I didn't want an entire

lifestyle of bondage. I didn't want the clubs or the costumes. I wanted to be normal, except when I wasn't. Yet again, I'd be branded.

I paced around the pool. Monica had to go. She and her song and her god damn artistic aspirations had to get cut out before I got infected. I had to do it quickly and move on. I had to ignore any and all pleas for forgiveness. I had to forget my feelings, how she wrapped herself

around me, how she'd charmed me and disarmed me. I needed to shock her out of my system.

I stopped, and like a siren's call, the pool invited me. I kicked off my shoes and dove in. The water was cold and heavy, and my clothes only made me sink lower. I swam to the surface, and the effort brought me back to my head. The panic and worry came back, but a lower grade. The usual stuff, not the

all-consuming stuff.

I navigated to the edge of the pool. I was afraid to get out because I would freeze my ass off, but mostly, I was afraid to deal with the woman on the porch, if she was even still there. I leaned my cheek on my forearm and said, “Monica, Monica, you were perfect.”

I was sad to lose her, but I couldn't be seen with her if she was singing that song, and she'd made clear I

wasn't to interrupt her work. I knew my little string of sadness would grow into a ball of yarn. I knew how much I wanted her, and why, and how. After knowing her only six weeks, I'd miss her.

My phone rang. It had been on the glass table I'd smashed and apparently survived. I pulled myself out of the pool and dripped my way over to it, my pant legs sticking.

It was Will
Santon.

“Hi, Will.”

“We found five, with mikes, all over the house. They were on wireless, and they’ve been disconnected. Probably after she sprayed the car outside.”

“We’ll need you to work on finding out who did this.” I wasn’t supposed to care anymore, but I found myself talking as if I did.

“Any ideas?”

“She’s working with an artist, Kevin Wainwright. They have a

history.”

“We’re on it,”
Santon said.

“Send my sister
the bill.”

“You got it.”

I was about to
hang up. “Santon?”

“Yeah?”

“Any in the
kitchen?”

“Nope.”

“Thanks,” I said
softly and hung up. My
relief dripped off me
with the cold water.
None in the kitchen. What
did we do in the

bedroom? I'd kissed her eyelids. Not optimum, certainly. Definitely a problem to be solved, because the fact they'd gotten inside at all was bad news, but nothing kinky got on video. At least if my private life was all the buzz, her dignity might be saved.

I don't know how long I stood there holding my phone, but when my teeth chattered, I went inside.

No cameras in the kitchen. Monica's

imagination had saved me a shard of embarrassment.

Meanwhile, she was having a huge crisis, and I threw a temper tantrum over something she apologized for. I had been ready to abandon her when she needed me to protect her because she wasn't perfect. And why? Because I was worried about what people thought.

They didn't know what I knew. They didn't know what it was to be

completely in control of a woman's body, her pleasure, her thoughts, her emotions. They didn't craft moments the way a sculptor molds clay, tapping her consciousness during the day to create anticipation for the night, pushing her, crafting our climaxes not just as a pleasurable endpoint, but as a carefully timed, deliberate *act*. The culmination of my intention was what was most gratifying, and I

couldn't give up control any more than Monica could give up music.

I had tried it with other women and failed or come up short. But not Monica. It wasn't just what she allowed and how she obeyed; it was the ways she didn't. Her moments of spontaneity came not in response to a weakness on my part, but the openings for surprise that I left her. Like the kitchen. The last place I expected to find her might have been the only

safe place in the house.

What we made together was greater than what I would have created myself. Monica was my perfect canvas. The rest would have to fall into place. She was mine. What we had was mine. I'd earned it.

Fuck the rest.

CHAPTER 22 .

MONICA

The blanket I'd wrapped around myself smelled of the old Jonathan. Sage. Fog. Jessica had chosen it for him, but I buried my face in it anyway. I stared at the open gate. A cab was on its way. If he didn't show up before the cab, I would just fold myself back into the world and never see him again. It couldn't be any harder than what I'd done

before.

I smelled him before I heard him. The leather-and-sawdust Jonathan. I looked back inside and saw him standing behind the chair closest to the door. His hair was wet, but his clothes were dry. He wore his trademarked mask of implacable amusement.

“You waited.”

“Cab’s coming.”

He sat in the chair. “I’m sorry I went off on you.”

“It’s fine.”

“I feel like I should explain.”

“Look, you got mad. I know why,” I said.

“No, you don’t.”
He leaned back in the chair and crossed an ankle over his knee.
“When I married Jessica, I was a nice vanilla guy. We had plenty of sex, and we thought we were just fine. We were. Except I always had this dark place because of what happened with Rachel. I was so young, and not

ready. And my father... well, I couldn't look at him. I still can't. I never told anyone. No one knew about it, except Jessica. Her knowing made me happy, and being happy, well, I started getting ideas about how good it would feel to fuck her just a little harder. Hold her hands down. Tell her when to come. Slap her ass." He paused, as if remembering some specific incident. "It didn't go over well. I

didn't know how to stop, and she didn't know how to shut up. All her friends were convinced I got off on beating her up. They told their husbands, and before you know it—”

“No one's talking to you at the Eclipse show.”

“Right. And I lost her. When you get divorced, you don't just give up the person, you give up all the dreams you had with that person. Those are harder to let go of.” He uncrossed his

ankle and put his elbows on his knees. “Now I’m with someone else, and she’s beautiful with me. But she sings this song, and everyone will hear it and think I’m trying to rape and abuse her. It all came back.”

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“You should cancel that cab.”

“I really want to go home.”

“You’re not going home tonight. They found cameras.”

“Oh, God.” My chest felt as if a spike went through it. That was my house. It had always been my house. I felt myself breaking down and I had to grind my teeth to keep together.

“It’s clean now. And there were none in the kitchen.”

I laughed with relief. The episode on the kitchen floor was the first thing I’d worried about and the one thing I tried not to consider as a possibility.

“We need to find out who did it. And now I really want to have you watched.”

I shook my head.
“I’ll stay with Darren.”

“That’s not a long-term solution.”

I got annoyed. He’d taken the conversation and made it his own. “Jonathan, stop it. Long-term solutions are my problem.”

“How’s that?”

I took a deep breath. I knew what I wanted to say, but after

finding out about my house, and his story, I didn't know if I had the strength. I curled deeper in the blanket. "I'm sorry, Jonathan. What I did with the song was wrong. I'll do what damage control I can. I'll record something else and get it to Jerry. I can't make Jessica unhear it, but it's not like she didn't know about your preferences."

"I know Eddie from Carnival Records, by the way. You met him at the Loft Club. Buddy

from—”

“Penn. Right. I’m sorry. I can’t make him unhear it either. Maybe he’ll think you’re hot shit now?”

He shrugged and swung his legs over the chair’s arm. He seemed really relaxed for a guy who looked about to belt me twenty minutes ago.

“I was careless with your feelings,” I continued. “I should have run it by you first. Because it’s your life, and you may not want

your kinky shit all over. I mean, it *is* all over, but you don't need your lover confirming it. I thought about it, and I don't want that shit all over either. I could play it off as metaphor, but your rep means I can't. Then we become the couple no one can talk to because we make them giggle."

He laughed a bitter little laugh, as if he knew exactly what I was talking about. He did. I was just repeating history for him. I'd be the second

woman to leave him because he was dominant. Before he came outside, I'd consoled myself with the fact that he didn't love me and we hadn't known each other that long. That seemed untrue, though. I was going to hurt him, and I was powerless to stop it.

“So,” I continued, “that’s when I realized if I’m going to be with you, I can’t talk to anyone. I have to keep a whole part of my life locked up tight

or people will look at me. I'm the submissive here. I'm the sucker getting her ass spanked. I'm the one walking around with bruises on her wrists. You're the master, and I'm under you. I mean, what the fuck am I doing? Do I not care about my life and my career? How am I supposed to get a leg up in a meeting when the guy on the other side of the desk is imagining me with a ball gag? How can I be seen as a musician

who can deliver in front of a crowd if they think I'm a man's slave?"

The cab pulled into the driveway in a flash of headlights.

"I'll send him back." Jonathan swung his legs straight.

I unwrapped myself from the blanket and stood. "No, I'm going. What we have is not what I want. It's too much. I've never met a man like you, and god willing, I never will again because I don't

think I could take it. I already can't imagine myself with anyone else."

He looked at me. "You're not leaving, Monica." He took my hands. His were cold, and the temptation to warm them between mine was unbearable.

I said, "I wanted you to know, before I go, that I love you. I thought I didn't want to love anyone again, and maybe I didn't. I mean, look what it comes with, right? The more I fell in

love with you, the harder it got to leave you. It's the hardest thing I've ever done."

When he stood, he seemed taller, closer, more solid. "You're not going."

"I am."

"No. Don't you see how perfect we are? What you're breaking isn't some little, meaningless coupling. We aren't some casual fuck, and we never were. Not from the first night. Not from the first time I

laid eyes on you. You were built for me. I denied it as long as I could, but we were meant to be together. You are the sea under my sky. We're bound at the horizon."

"Please don't make this worse." My voice cracked. I sniffled. God. Damn. Those fucking tears.

He stood and put his arms around me, engulfing me. How he fit. How his touch felt perfect on me. How I

wanted him as he kissed my cheek and neck and breathed my name. “Don’t go,” he said softly. “I want you, little goddess. Always. Please. Tell me what you want. Tell me what I have to do.”

The cab driver honked.

“Let me go, Jonathan.”

“No.”

I pushed him away with all the force I had, and still he held me. “Let me go.”

He squeezed me harder. “We’re not finished.”

I wanted to fall into him, to acquiesce completely. Giving in to his embrace and his touch, letting him take me upstairs would have been so easy. That night would have been beautiful and tender, but what about the next day, and the next week, and the next month?

When I pushed him away again, he released me. I stepped

back, almost falling. He held his hand out to help me, but I avoided him.

“Good-bye. I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry.” He stood straight, his chin proud and his shoulders relaxed. “This isn’t over.”

I wanted to tell him I loved him again, but it would have done more harm than good. I ran down the steps. The cab was about to leave without me, but I grabbed the door handle and

opened it. The driver stopped, and I got in.

With one last glance back, I saw Jonathan backlit on that magnificent porch, standing as if he had complete control of the situation, every inch a king.

—*To* *Be*
Continued—

Book 5 – *Burn*
will be released on or

before 6/20.

Songs of Submission has a Goodreads group. Join [CD Canaries](#) to get in on the discussion and trade supplemental stories.

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Contents

[CHAPTER 1.](#)

[CHAPTER 2.](#)

[CHAPTER 3.](#)

[CHAPTER 4.](#)

[CHAPTER 5.](#)

[CHAPTER 6.](#)

[CHAPTER 7.](#)

[CHAPTER 8.](#)

[CHAPTER 9.](#)

[CHAPTER 10.](#)

[CHAPTER 11.](#)

[CHAPTER 12.](#)

[CHAPTER 13.](#)

[CHAPTER 14.](#)

[CHAPTER 15.](#)

[CHAPTER 16.](#)

[CHAPTER 17.](#)

[CHAPTER 18.](#)

[CHAPTER 19.](#)

[CHAPTER 20.](#)

[CHAPTER 21.](#)

[CHAPTER 22.](#)