

resist.



Songs of Submission
Book Six CD Reiss

Resist

by

CD Reiss

*Songs of Submission – Book
Six*

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.....*This is Book*

Six.....

FAIR WARNING

Massive Cliffhanger at the end

Chapter 1.

MONICA

At 11:23 a.m., I turned past the historic fig trees. The gate opened. I pulled the Honda in and parked next to the Jag. I checked my face in the mirror and went up to the porch. I dropped my bag and knocked. Waited. As I was about to knock again, the gate clattered closed. The button for the gate was just behind the front door, so he must have been there. I had no idea how long he'd make me stand outside. Patience was always a part of his game.

The door opened. His hair was brushed back and clean, his face shaved. He wore a tan polo that was tight in the

arms, accentuating his hard, smooth biceps. His jeans hung on his hips as though they were made for him. And the motherfucker had the nerve to wear a belt.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” he said. His eyes, however, didn’t look sore at all. He looked as if nothing ever touched him. I had no idea how he did that.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “I was worried.”

“I’m fine. It’s going to be fine.”

I had been waiting to hear that before I dealt with the other issue that had kept me from eating and sleeping for two days. “Then, what the fuck?”

“What the fuck, what?”

I crossed my arms. “What. The. Fuck. Jonathan.”

He put his fingertips on my jaw and slid them to the side of my neck. I sighed at his caress. His thumb brushed my cheek, his pinkie tickling the sensitive part of my throat. I involuntarily tilted my head into him.

“Your safe word?” he said.

“Tange-fucking-rine. Now explain ___”

He grabbed the hair at the back of my head and yanked me to my knees. I lost my breath, the motion was so sharp and hard. I was kneeling in a second, and he flipped his pants open in a few swift moves. His dick was rigid and

straight at my lips, glistening with a drop of liquid.

I had told him about that fantasy the night I gave him the list that became a song. He said he wouldn't fulfill it until I trusted him. I closed my mouth tight.

“Open,” he commanded.

I turned my eyes to him, his cock in the foreground of my vision. His face bent toward me. He slapped his dick against my lips, twisting my hair. I opened my lips to tell him to fuck himself, but I was unprepared for the ferocity with which he jammed his cock down my throat. I choked, gagged.

He didn't stop. He grabbed my hair with his other hand and pivoted me, controlling me, owning me. I felt as if he

wanted me off balance and uncomfortable, held up not by my knees, but by the knots of hair in his fists that shifted my head where his cock wanted. I opened my mouth and throat and let him take me. I made noises there were no letters for. Spit ran down my chin, and when I looked up at him, he gazed back with fierce intensity. He took his dick out of my mouth.

“You fucked her,” I said.

“No, I didn’t.”

“You lie.”

He pushed me into the house.

“Hands and knees.”

I fell, but I scooted myself to standing. I backed away. My breath

rasped from the facefuck I'd just endured. "Say it. You and Jessica."

"I didn't do anything."

"You. Lie."

He pushed me against the wall, hard. I pushed him away.

"Pick your skirt up" he said.

"Admit it."

"Pick your skirt up, Monica."

"Admit it."

He took my shoulders and twisted me to face the wall, inches from a Mondrian. We had agreed to all of it, more or less, at the hotel in Vancouver. Hours of making that boundary list on the couch, and one scenario we embraced was that sometimes I'd fight him, and I'd use the safe word if shit got too intense

or painful Right then, I wanted to fuck him as much as I wanted to resist. I'd longed for him for two days, hovering somewhere between rage and panic.

He yanked up my skirt, pushing me against the wall with his other hand.

“What am I admitting?”

“The cops said you hit Jessica with a belt and fucked her.”

“They lied to get you to talk.”

“Fuck. You.” He moved my panties aside, jammed his fingers in my cunt, and flicked my clit with his pinkie.

“First chance you get, you cheat.” I moaned.

“You're so fucking wet, Monica.” He pulled my hair until my neck was

twisted so I could face him. “You wouldn’t be if you believed that.”

“They didn’t pick you up for nothing.”

“What if I did fuck her? You left me.”

The thought made me so angry I flung my arm back and hit him in the face. He threw me over the sideboard, bumping a little bronze sculpture of stacked squares and knocking over a picture of his sisters. His dick pressed against my ass, hard, hot, and ready. One of my shoes fell off.

“They said they had audio,” I cried, face wet with tears. “They have pictures of her ass. It’s welted. You did it. Just say it.”

“It.” He pulled my panties down to mid-thigh.

“You fucked her.”

“I showed her what she was asking for.” He slid his cock in me as if he had an engraved invitation, fucking me as though he owned me.

“God, Jonathan,” I cried, tears forming. “Why? Why don’t I mean anything to you?” I didn’t say “no” or “stop” because even though we had a safe word, I knew him. If I told him to stop, he would, and the pounding I was getting was the pounding I wanted.

He slapped against me with every word. “I. Didn’t. Touch. Her.”

“Liar.” I swung back, trying to hit

him. My reward was having my arm twisted behind my back so I couldn't move it.

“What did you tell them, Monica? You told them I spanked you, too.”

“I said it was consensual. I don't lie.”

“Good for you.” He let my arm go but pressed my face to the tabletop so hard I couldn't move. He changed his angle and fucked hard and slow for a few strokes, pushing me down. The lacquer bit my nostrils. Pleasure was overtaking me, overwhelming my better sense.

That was what I wanted, wasn't it? I wanted to get fucked, but I didn't want to want it. I wanted his cock, and I

wanted it hard, without the responsibility of asking for explanations. He pulled my hair again, yanking my head to the side so I could see him.

“I want to see you come,” he said.

“Go fuck yourself,” I replied breathlessly.

“Put your hand on your cunt.”

I twisted, resisting the order, and he used the torque to drag one leg out of my panties. He put that leg over his shoulder while the other stayed on the tabletop. My other shoe fell with a clomp. I lay on my side while he stood, shifting to straddle the leg that wasn't over his shoulder.

“Now.” He put his thumb in his

mouth and made a wet, sucking pop as he pulled it out. He pressed it to my clit.

“Oh, God.”

He pounded me hard. The photo bounced off the sideboard and crashed to the floor.

“I said I want to see you come,” he gasped, taking my pussy with his dick.

“Fuck. I hate you, fucker.” I swung at him with my free hand, but he caught it before I struck him. He pinned it to my ankle with his strong fingers. “I hate you.” It sounded like a plea.

“Well,” he said, a word for each stroke, “I. Love. You.”

He kissed my cheek, and everything in me tightened around him as

his cruel thumb pressed, twisted, rubbed my clit. He grunted against my cheek. He pinched the fleshy nub, pushing and pulling in opposite directions. I came like a gunshot, a crack of a scream exploding from my throat. I begged him to stop, but he kept rubbing, and I kept coming until my cries must have sounded far more like pain than pleasure. Jonathan pulled his face from mine, circling his hips as he groaned a long *mmm* sound.

He was coming, and I loved him.
Fuck.

Chapter 2.

The cops had taken my information and made sure Lil picked me up. They asked me nothing besides my most basic information and let me know I had to make myself available for questioning the next day. They came to my house in the morning, gently asking the most painful questions, breaking my heart with every word.

I'd cleaned every corner of my house except Gabby's room. I stayed up all night, eyes glued to the television and internet. Whatever was happening with Jonathan, it had been either unworthy of media attention or kept under a dark, wet blanket.

I had called Geraldine Stark to thank her for letting us know about Kevin. She should have told us right away, before Darren had to call randomly, but she treated the whole thing like squeaky gossip. I made excuses and hung up. I called Darren. He was with Adam and couldn't talk. I didn't tell him about Jonathan. It would have taken forever to explain that I knew nothing.

I could not have imagined more tortuous days between watching him get into the squad car and getting his text.

—*Where are you?*—

I'd grasped the phone, letting half the tension in my body drop out of me

and onto the kitchen floor.

I was frozen in place, looking at the ellipsis at the bottom of the screen that meant he was typing. The shelves from my fridge were dripping soap, forgotten in the sink.

—*Can you play?*—

Initially, my biggest fear had been that I was somehow responsible for the accusation of domestic violence. That someone had heard about us, or seen my

bruises at the Eclipse show. Or that maybe Kevin had gotten a word in edgewise at the border. Because who else had he been with? Who else had he hurt?

—Be here at 11:23, exactly—

But then the police had gently questioned me. No cold room. No good cop, bad cop. Two female officers spoke in a soft voices and told me they'd protect me from the man I loved and the sex I craved. They told me Jessica had

come to them for an order of protection with photos proving he'd abused her during sex. Her reputation as someone who wanted nothing to do with Jonathan's kinky side indicated she'd been the unwilling victim of abuse and possibly rape.

I had gotten through the interview by using my customer service smile, but inside, I boiled.

—*No, I saw it*—

At 11:22 a.m., I had sat outside his gate in my car, waiting for the time on my phone to flip. I didn't know what the exactness of the time was about. I felt as if he was taking a slice of control and connection in a situation where he felt he had none.

I didn't believe he'd raped her, because I knew him. I didn't believe he'd struck her without consent for the same reason. I was livid because during the time we'd been separated, he'd been so broken up about me he fucked around

with, who else? Jessica.

At the same time, for two days, I had missed him. I worried about him. I didn't sleep enough. I went to dinner with friends but barely ate. I checked my phone so often, Yvonne had snapped it off the table and pocketed it. When he finally did text, I felt relief, and rage, and at the sight of the word *play*, I felt rushing need between my legs that only he could release.

After he took full control of my resistant body, yanking an orgasm out of me, he picked me up and got me standing. I touched the hem of my skirt, but he moved my hands away.

“What now, Jonathan?” I was emotionally frustrated, sexually

satisfied, and physically exhausted.

“Let me,” he said, kneeling in front of me. He held out the empty leg of my panties, and I stepped into them.

“You hurt me. And you cheated.”

“Hurting you isn’t my fault. It’s Jessica’s. And the second isn’t true.” He slid my panties back up my legs, running his fingers under them to get them in the right place.

“It doesn’t matter that we broke up,” I said.

“Yes, it would, if I’d done anything.” He pulled down my skirt, caressing my ass, my thighs, and my knees as if they were precious. “She came here the day I saw you at the Stock.

Debbie said you'd moved on, and I was upset."

"She said that? It wasn't true."

He looked up at me, his hands on the backs of my thighs. "I know. Debbie's a yenta. I should have known. But Jessica was here, and she goaded me. That's not an excuse, but it's what happened. She said she wanted to do it kinky just once, and even after I explained exactly what that meant, she pushed all my buttons."

"So you fucked her."

"No! Jesus, Monica." He cupped my ass as if to make me understand. "I had her unbutton her shirt, and she still wanted it. So I bent her over the table and gave her three whacks with my belt.

I'm not proud of it. But everyone's clothes were on."

"Do you understand how unlikely that story sounds?"

"Yes. But you're the only one, Monica. The only one."

"I don't forgive you."

But I did, and we both knew it. I looked down at him, with his tourmaline eyes and copper hair, and believed him despite my better judgment. I forgave him despite my misgivings. I loved him just because I did. My heart wasn't sensible or guarded enough. Not by a sight. I was a walking raw nerve ending of emotion, as if the years I'd spent away from men and sex had made me

more emotional, more vulnerable, more foolish. I ran my fingers through his hair, feeling like the victim of a crime of consent.

“Can you stay with me a few hours?” he asked.

“Let me clean up, then I’ll let you know.”

Chapter 3.

He was on the back patio, sock feet on the table, phone pressed to his ear. I watched him, thinking about how much had changed since the last time I watched him on that chaise, talking to Jessica on the phone. I'd left without saying goodbye. How long ago was that? A little over two months? Leaving without saying goodbye again would be unforgivable.

I slid the door, the change in pressure making a clack. He looked up, and when he saw me, he waved me outside. He'd hung up by the time I reached him.

“My lawyer slash sister,” he said,

holding out his hand. I took it but sat in the chair, swinging my legs over the arm.

“That sounds awkward.”

He laughed. “You have no idea. And don’t get too comfortable, because she wants to meet you.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“It’s Saturday.”

“Lawyers don’t get weekends. She has no kids or husband, so she works.”

I sighed. I wanted to spend the next hours soothing myself with his body, trying to rub away feeling manipulated and used. My disappointment must have been evident, because Jonathan pulled me up,

wrapping his arms around me.

“I owe you. I know,” he said.

“Fine.”

Lil drove. Apparently, we were headed out to Beverly Hills. Traffic was pretty terrible, even for a weekend. Jonathan and I sat in the back seat. I had a leg hitched on the seat so I could face him. He leaned in my direction but faced forward.

“Are you going to wait for your sister to debrief me? And which one is this?”

“This is Margie. She’s the oldest. She’s very straightforward. I think you’ll like her.”

“And she’s going to tell me

everything in legalese, because you won't say a word about getting picked up at the airport and put into a police car while smiling like your Mirandas were a big joke.”

“I was smiling for your benefit.” He took my hand, weaving our fingers together. “I didn't want you to worry.”

“I'm worried. Very worried. I was sick to my stomach until the cops came and told me what happened.”

“Which was false.”

“Then I was worried about you and mad at the same time. So, fail. And stop avoiding.”

He leaned his head back and looked out the window.

“Is it bad?” I asked.

“We don’t know. We’ve got radio silence from my ex-wife.” He sat up and faced me. “The prosecutor’s going to want to talk to you.”

“I’ll tell them the same thing I told the cops.”

“I don’t want you to think lying’s going to protect me.”

We just stared at each other for a few seconds, maybe more. It felt like forever and not long enough before I had to break it. He put his fingertips to my cheek, brushing his thumb on my lower lip. His hands were magical, igniting a fire, touching a fuse that ran to the core between my legs by way of my heart.

“I know you have lying in you,” I

said.

“My lies are all white.”

“Flake white.”

“The brightest, most guilt-free of the whites.”

“And the one so toxic it’s illegal.”

A smile curled one side of his mouth. “I’m not lying about Jessica or about anything that matters.”

“Who decides what matters?”

His hand slid off my throat and down my chest, resting on my sternum. “You matter. We matter. I haven’t touched another woman since I had you at the Loft Club. Monica, it’s you. Being with you is all I can think about. It’s all I want. We are bound. I can’t be unfaithful to you any more than the sky can be

unfaithful to the sea.”

“Nice words.”

“Your nipples are hard.” He brushed them with the backs of his fingers. “Your body won’t deny what your mind fights.”

“If I decide to believe you, understand I know there are things you’ve lied about.”

“Such as?” He drew a nail over my nipple, the fabric like Teflon, letting it slide across. My lips parted.

“I don’t believe Kevin got picked up just because,” I said.

He pinched my nipple hard, giving a little twist. My back arched.

“Who cares?” he whispered.

“I do. About the truth.”

He put his hand under my skirt. I was a little sore from the hate fuck in his living room, but my wet lips fluttered under his touch.

“Open your legs.”

I did, and he hitched up my dress until it gathered just under my breasts. He placed my heels on the seat until my underwear was the only thing between me and his eyes.

“The truth, Monica,” he said, putting his thumb lightly on my clit, using my juices to slide over the skin. “The truth is that I love you. The rest is unnecessary complication.”

“I disagree.” But I was lost. It

didn't matter if I agreed or not. I wanted some part of his body to rub against me. He flicked my engorged clit, and my breath hitched with the pain and pleasure.

“You won't.” He took a small box from his pocket, opened it, and plucked my diamond navel bar from its velvet bed. He kissed between my legs, over my underwear, breathing on my clit to make it warm and receptive. His lips traveled to my naked navel, which he kissed gently. “You belong to me. That means I take care of you. Your body and your heart.” He slid the navel bar through the piercing. “That means I'm committed to your happiness. And it means there is no other woman.” He slid

the smaller diamond cap on top, sealing the gem to me. “I don’t share. And you don’t have to either. You have to trust me.”

“I can’t.”

“It’s a choice. Make it.” He slid to his knees before me and slipped his fingers under my panties. I lifted my butt, and he pulled them off. His tongue ran from my knee to my thigh. When his tongue found my folds, I thought I’d burst.

“Oh...” I put my fingers in his hair. He looked up and said, “Hands under your ass.”

I sat on them.

“Keep these legs open.”

The commands turned me on, sending another wave of pleasure through me. By the time his tongue found my clit, I was non-verbal. He licked so gently, flicking it, then circling my hole, making sure every inch of me was on high alert. A little suck, a flick with his fingers. Sweet, exquisite torture. He slid those flicking fingers in me, then sucked my clit again.

“May I come, sir?” I asked in a breath.

“Maybe,” he whispered. “Keep these legs spread for me.” He ran his tongue over my clit again.

“Oh, God.”

He slid his thumb in my cunt, and

when he drew it out, he traced the line up and down me. Another flick made me bite back a scream.

“Let me come, sir.”

“Say please.”

“Please, I’m begging. Please.”

“Are you mine?” he asked.

“I’m yours. You own me. My cunt is yours. Please let me come.”

“Am I yours?”

“I own your sorry ass and everything it’s attached to, please. Please.”

He licked my clit again, sucked it through his teeth, and made my ass lift off the seat. He got three fingers in my cunt and hooked them, pushing into the rough spot inside me. His name left my

lips over and over, and I tried to keep my legs open when they just wanted to clench around him. His tongue and teeth worked me until a tidal wave of pleasure broke through, sending shocks of fire through me. His fingers inside me did something else, blinding me with a different note, a severe release that felt sharp as a razor, strong as a sledgehammer.

I pushed into him, holding myself up on the hands he'd commanded under my ass. I hissed his name through my teeth so Lil wouldn't hear through the glass. My orgasm abated, fading like the end of a song. His tongue's ministrations slowed. My hips twitched around him.

I ran my fingers through his hair as he kissed the inside of my thighs.

“Jonathan?”

“Monica.”

“One day this will stop working.”

“But not today.”

Chapter 4.

We went into the elevator with a man in a grey suit, putting our backs to the wall and watching the floors light up above us. Jonathan's hand hooked mine and clutched it.

He was holding my hand in an elevator. Like a normal person. I looked at him, and he turned to me.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

Grey Suit got out, and the doors slid shut.

“Margie litigated my divorce,” Jonathan said, still facing the doors.

“Okay?”

“We had a lot of talk about

irreconcilable differences over sex. How it was had, et cetera. There were gag orders that were broken. No pun intended.”

“Okay.”

“My sister may look at you in that way you were afraid of. She’s still curious about the whole thing.”

“That’s awkward.”

“You have no idea.”

My face hurt from holding back a nervous smile. “If she’s curious, you should send Debbie at her with a riding crop.”

He glanced at me, and I knew he was trying to hold back nervous laughter as much as I was. The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. “Madame Silk

would have her crawling on the floor in a second.”

“I knew it!” I exclaimed.

He put his arm around me, and we walked into the hall. He opened glass doors for me. Two receptionists sat behind a stark white counter topped with red blooms. The older seemed to know him and picked up the phone when she saw him. He still had his arm around me.

“Did Madame Silk ever get her crop on you?” I whispered.

“We discussed it and decided against.”

“How thoughtful and sensible of you.”

He pulled me to him. “It was

much, much more complex than that.”

“Mister Drazen?” the receptionist called. “Come this way.” We followed her past the desk and into the belly of the office. He held my hand the whole way.

Margie was almost as tall as I was, and she shook my hand like a man. She did not size me up, nor did she give me the impression she had an ounce of curiosity about what I did in bed with her brother. Either Jonathan was wrong and she didn't give a shit, or she was as in control as he was. Her sage pencil skirt and tapered jacket were tailored to exist without being noticed as anything but part of a God-created whole. I knew her age, and she wore it well. She had the alertness of a child, yet her

comportment was so graceful and self-aware, she was more adult than I thought I'd ever feel.

We sat across from her desk like recalcitrant schoolchildren, facing huge windows that looked over the city. We shared small talk, a few lines about their family I didn't understand, a word or two about traffic on the 405, and a couple of innocent questions about waitressing and music.

Then Margaret Drazen put her elbows on the desk and indicated her brother while speaking to me. "So what did this one tell you?"

"He lied. As usual." I glanced at Jonathan. He leaned into the arm of his

chair and rubbed his upper lip as if he was trying to hide his mouth. I knew he was biting back a smile.

“Which lie was it this time?” Margie asked me.

“The one where they both had their clothes on and there was no touching.”

“This the same scene where he hit his ex-wife with a belt?”

“That one.”

Margie leaned back. She looked as if she was going to fall out the window and get poured over Los Angeles. “This is so fucking fascinating. See, he tells me this story, and I’m thinking assault and battery. You hear the exact same story and think infidelity.”

Jonathan broke in. “You’re going off the rails, Margie.”

“But, Jonny...”

“We talked about this,” he said, his posture still relaxed.

“It’s very simple,” I said, my voice clipped and brusque. “His belt is for holding up his pants, binding me, and hurting me. His body, any part of it, is to give *me* pleasure and pain. If he gives any other woman either of those things with his body or any clothing accessory, it’s cheating.” I turned to him. “The fact that we were officially broken up notwithstanding.”

“You said she wouldn’t want to talk about it,” Margie said to Jonathan.

“Apparently I was misinformed.”

“You two need to talk more.”

“Sorry if you’re an hour behind the curve.”

Margie put up her hand. “Okay, that was fun, let’s move on.” She turned back to me. “First. Let me tell you about the great state of California. We’re a preferred arrest state. Any domestic violence accusation with some merit warrants an arrest.”

“Define merit,” I said.

“You’re sharp. Merit means she had a recording of the incident on her phone and pictures of a reddened ass consistent with getting hit hard with a belt. Since she provided all of this to the

police, the prosecutor decides how to proceed. But with the multimedia presentation available to him and the years of rumors, if he didn't arrest Jonathan for felony battery, he'd lose his job. Even if she drops the charges or recants, the prosecution still has to continue."

"Felony battery?" I said softly.

"They're required to arrest as a felony," Margie said. "The DA can bump it down to misdemeanor, but if the Ice Queen remains trenchant, a reduction's unlikely."

I couldn't look at Jonathan. It sounded so dire, and yet, what he'd done to her wasn't a fraction of what he'd done with me. "I don't understand how

this will lead to getting her husband back.”

“Ex-husband,” Jonathan grumbled.

“Agreed,” Margie said, “especially not with the mandatory order of protection.”

“This is very simple.” Jonathan twisted his whole body to face me. “My ex-wife doesn’t want me back. At the time, I didn’t know what she wanted, and I was trying to get it out of her. You don’t have to like the way I did it, and if you want me to apologize again, I will.”

“You can stick your apology.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. You and I were broken up, but I knew you were coming back.” His face flashed with that

cocky confidence then changed to something more sincere. “But what I wanted to tell you was that at the time, I didn’t know what she wanted. Margie and I figured it out last night.”

“She wants you, Jonathan,” I said.

“No. She wants money. She’s had trouble maintaining her lifestyle and her art at the same time. I set up a trust for her to pull from whenever she wants. It’s a few million a year and I don’t notice it, but that’s what she uses to finance her work. We were set to renew the terms after ten years, and I cut her off.”

Margie broke in. “It’s a revocable trust. He can do what he wants unless he’s declared incompetent. Then it automatically flips to an irrevocable

trust. The terms will be reinstated. It's a stopgap against hospitalizations, drug addictions, that sort of thing.”

Jonathan broke in. “She’s using my kink to call my sanity into question. She pushed me into spanking her and tape recorded it to show how out of control I am.”

They paused their tag-team routine, and I glanced from one to the other. Margie leaned forward with her elbows on the desk; Jonathan with his ankle crossed over his knee, leaning over the arm of the chair toward me.

“The cameras?” I said. “She was trying to get something to show you were crazy? How would it be admissible?”

“It’s all back room deals,” Margie said. “We think she might have counted on a little shame from you to corroborate, as well as my brother’s desire to protect you. Kinky shit on tape could have served a hundred purposes.”

“Fuck her.”

“That’s the spirit.”

He took my hand. “She came to me only because the cameras were a bust.”

I squeezed his hand. “I’ve met her. I’ll tell you one thing. She’d drop everything to have you back.”

“I’m spoken for.”

“Regardless. She always manages to get you to do things, doesn’t she?”

Silence built between us as we held hands and searched each other's faces. I examined his for understanding that what he did was wrong, and I think he searched mine for forgiveness.

Margie cleared her throat.

He and I didn't move.

"Monica," she said. "I want to tell you why you're here."

"To verify that he's telling the truth?" I said without moving my eyes from him.

"No. I need to tell you what to expect."

I moved my gaze from him to Margie and leaned back in my chair. He didn't let my hand go. She took that as

her cue to continue.

“She’s probably going to contact you and ask you to verify that he hits you. Just know anything you say will be twisted. She has to prove that what he’s doing is impairing his ability to function. Barring that, since she’s after his money, she’ll threaten to go public and blackmail him.”

Jonathan squeezed my hand, and I turned to him. “If I spend even thirty days in jail, we go back to the old terms of the trust and she can drain it.”

“Arraignment’s next week,” Margie said.

I felt as if I was being played, as if those two had worked out a routine and delivered it. I couldn’t tell if I was

being lied to or just manipulated, but I didn't believe Jonathan gave a rat's ass about a few million a year. Something else was at stake that they weren't talking about, and I needed to shake things up.

"I think I should go see her," I said.

The air went out of the room.

"No," Jonathan said.

"I'm sorry?" Margie seemed keen for an explanation.

"Absolutely not." Jonathan's tone was definite and dominant.

"I wasn't asking permission," I replied without my submissive voice.

"Let's hear it," Margie said. "She

might have something.”

“The only way you’re going to get an angle on what she intends is if I see her. If she makes an offer, I can take her up on it and go see her to get dirt on you. I’ll tell her I’m pissed at you because you spanked her. We’ll have tea and talk about what an asshole you are. I come back here and report everything.”

“No.”

“Are you going to the Collector’s Board thing?” Margie asked Jonathan before turning to me. “She’ll be there. It can be a casual conversation.”

Jonathan’s tone was clipped, as if he didn’t even want to talk about it. “It’s all Jessica’s people, and they’re going to be snickering about this arrest. I won’t

subject Monica to them, and I'm not going without her. So. Done."

"What is it?" I asked Margie. "It sounds like a great idea."

"Fifty of the city's biggest art collectors drinking and spending money," Margie said. "I went with him last year. It was like high school without the acne."

"And Jessica will be there?" I asked.

"Four artists for every collector." Margie smirked. "You never met a bigger bunch of whores in your life."

Jonathan was right, I *did* like her. "I want to go."

Jonathan stood up. "Margie, as

usual, a fucking pleasure.” He looked at me and held out his hand. “Let’s go.”

Margie pushed her chair back and stood. We were done. I got up without taking his hand.

Chapter 5.

MONICA

I didn't speak until the elevator doors closed. "You know I'm right."

He was on me in a second, his tongue prying my mouth open, his hands on my face, his hard cock against my hip. I had much to say, but none of it seemed important. I was helpless. A ring of fire built between my legs at his touch, portents of pleasure pushing me forward. He hitched my leg up and did a slow grind against me.

"Jonathan. I should do it. I mean it." My words came in gasps.

"No."

"I can help you."

He smacked the red button on the control panel, and the elevator came to a halt. A bell rang in a constant clatter, but he didn't pull away. He pulled my skirt up and hooked his finger in the crotch of my panties, sliding his finger along my wet folds.

A voice came over the intercom. "What's your emergency?" It sounded automated, as if there really wasn't someone on the other end.

He turned to the panel and said something in a language I didn't understand, then put his lips on mine as if it was our last kiss.

"Can you repeat that?" asked the voice robotically.

He repeated it and undid his pants, pulling out his gorgeous cock.

“I’ll have someone there in ten minutes.”

“Cameras.”

“It’s Saturday. No one’s at the desk. Whole system’s probably shut down.”

He fell into me, pushing me into the wall, a hand pulling the crotch of my panties away as the fingertips dug into my ass. I hitched my leg on his hips. He guided himself into me and thrust hard, shocking the breath right out of me. Bringing my other leg around him, he thrust again. And again.

“Oh, fuck,” I said.

“Fuck is right.” He twisted my nipple through my shirt. The exquisite pain was a direct line between my legs, making me spread them wider. He buried his face in my neck. “You are not to see her, goddess.”

“Jesus. I can’t think.”

“Don’t think.” He pushed his belly on my clit, and a thousand fireworks went off between my thighs. “Just do what I ask.” He rotated his hips, rubbing me sideways, then forward. He looked me in the eye, and let his hand creep up my face. He slipped a finger in my mouth. I tried to suck on it, but I couldn’t keep my lips closed; I was gasping so hard. He pulled it out, dragging saliva

across my cheek.

“I’m coming,” I said.

“You’re coming, what?”

“Sir.”

He didn’t withhold. He pummeled me, driving forward until I cried out through clenched teeth, pressing my legs around him, praying to a God I didn’t even believe in. Jonathan’s prayer was right behind mine, and he grunted it into the spot where my ear met my neck. His purposeful thrusts slowed into jerks, leaving nothing but hot breath on me. Our chests rose and fell in time, and our mouths found each other in a gentle, satisfied kiss.

The alarm suddenly seemed louder and more annoying, and the

elevator cold and hard. Only Jonathan's face, as it took up the whole of my vision, was soft and inviting. He pulled himself from me and gently lowered my legs. As I straightened my skirt, he pressed the alarm button. Blissful silence followed, and the elevator jerked down.

I had about thirty seconds to say what I wanted to say, and I was not eager to do it. "I'm going. She's wanted to tell me something for a month, and it's time I heard it."

He pressed his lips together. "No."

"You have to trust me. I committed to you. That means

something.”

“I get it. You don’t need to prove it to me.”

“I’m not trying to prove anything to you. I don’t have to. I dedicated myself to you. I gave my body to you. That doesn’t mean I’m suddenly more compliant.”

Chapter 6.

JONATHAN

I put Monica in the Bentley so Lil could take her to work. I refused to hear another word about her seeing Jessica, but I should have acted more laid back. Such rigidity would only make her want to see my ex-wife that much more. Yet I couldn't even pretend I would talk about it later. I had to let Monica think it was about money, but the truth was that Jessica knew too much. "Just paying her off" might have seemed cheap in the short run, but in the long run, it did nothing to protect me. I had to find a better way to manage the problem, and I needed to buy time with compliance.

My lunch with Eddie Milpas was three blocks away. I called my sister and walked.

“So?” I said.

“She’s not your type,” Margie said. “She has dark hair and a brain.”

“Thank you. I didn’t need your approval.”

“Neither did she. Which I like. I always expected your next one would be on her hands and knees, licking a doormat. That’s not what you got. You got someone bigger than your grip. So, good luck with that.”

“If they put her up on the stand, I’m worried.”

“You shouldn’t be. She looked me

right in the eye when she made her claim on the contents of your closet. If the truth is something you need to use, she'll tell it. But I wouldn't count on her to lie," Margie said.

"Monica? No. I'd never ask her to. She's..." I stopped myself, wanting to use words like *clean* and *pure*. They sounded ridiculous. "She's honorable."

"God help you, then."

"I don't want her talking to Jessica."

"What did you want me to do about that?" Margie asked as if bored, but I could tell she knew what I was going to ask.

"I want Will Santon's team back."

"You want to follow her. After

she just got over surveillance equipment in her house. You're a paragon of sensitivity. Really."

I stopped outside Karen M's. I saw Eddie at a window seat. No small thing. A year ago, they would have seated him by the bathrooms. "Do *you* want her talking to Jessica? Because that woman's going to lie. She's going to turn a sexless spanking into a grudge fuck, and then I'm going to be the one licking a doormat."

Margie sighed. "I gotta tell you, little brother, on the rare occasions you feel something, you go deep."

"And with respect to that, I'd appreciate your indulgence."

“Take Santon. But on a personal note...”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t get caught. In case you haven’t noticed, you’re on thin ice already.”

We hung up. Sheila was my favorite sister, but Margie was always a voice of sanity when things got chaotic.

I sat across from Eddie. The window looked over a line of tall bamboo meant to block the sight of Wilshire Boulevard traffic. Eddie looked at the menu, then at me, then back at the menu, as if he didn’t know exactly what was on it.

“Nice tie,” I said as an opener.

“Thanks.” His tone was clipped and quiet. I knew the guy. He was a percolating case of verbal diarrhea unless he was pissed off.

“I hear they’ve changed to locally grown tomatoes,” I said, “so avoid the caprese.”

“I heard the same.”

“There’s a shitstain on your cuff,” I said. He glanced at me, then away. “Are we dating, Ed? Did I just fuck your best friend or get you the wrong birthday gift or something?”

Eddie, reengaged in the conversation, leaned on the window, spreading his arm over the table so he could fuss with a matchbook. “My boss

gets back from a trip Friday. Some last minute thing to look at property up north, and he saw the girl I've been pushing. But according to him, I've been doing it wrong. My whole marketing strategy? Wrong. So *he's* managing her. *He's* signing her. Personally. Harry Enrich hasn't personally managed talent in fifteen years."

"She'll be happy to hear it."

"She shouldn't be. It's not all skinny ties and burning CDs any more. He hasn't caught up to MySpace falling apart. She'll be on his learning curve when he doesn't even know he has one. That leather corset's gonna start looking real comfy."

The waiter came. We ordered

quickly. That had apparently been bothering him, and I needed to clear it up. He was burned. The collection of talent was his job, and a singular voice had been pulled from under him. In a city full of hopeful musicians, voices like Monica's were impossible to come by. Needles in haystacks. Finding another voice he could use could take him a year or a lifetime.

“Ed, listen. I don't want any hard feelings. But it wasn't happening your way. I could have gotten Randy from Vintage Records up there just as easy.”

“Randy Rothstein? Please.”

“But I kept it at Carnival out of respect for you.”

He laughed. I admit I smiled as well. The notion was ridiculous. He was up a creek and had a right to be angry. I had the right to not care.

“You went over my head less than a week after you beaned me,” he said. “I had a headache for a day and a half.”

“I apologized.”

Eddie pushed his drink aside as if it was an actual obstacle. “Listen, asshole. If you had a problem with me signing your girlfriend, you could have told me.”

“So you could what? Tell me to go fuck myself? She wasn’t signing with you anyway. Not all decked out in leather and chains.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Ed. She was walking. Who’s going to know it better than me? I saved your ass and hers. Now you can all make money together.”

“I got nothing. Enrich can have her. Without a marketing angle, she can sing like a mermaid and it wouldn’t matter.”

“Mermaids don’t sing. You’re thinking of sirens.”

He shook his head and smirked. “You need to go out and find me another girl who likes to get tied up.”

“I have one for you.” I lowered my voice and leaned in. “Nice voice, but she comes with an angle. Might not be as

hot as what you had in mind, but it's like a slot and a tab. She's got something already going."

"I swear to god. Where do you find the time?"

"She's an artist," I said. "Think Laurie Anderson but drop dead gorgeous. Plays everything. She can play the spoons and bring you to tears. Has the chops for installation and performance work, knows the art scene."

"Not as commercial," he said.

"It's what I have."

"You got a name?"

The waiter came with lunch, and I wrote the name on a napkin.

Chapter 7.

MONICA

I headed down Echo Park Avenue on foot, phone to my ear.

“Are you in the house?” I asked as I pushed the gate open.

“Just got dressed,” Darren said.

“I’m on my way. No, wait, I’m on your patio. Are you alone?”

He opened the door in jeans and his red Music Store polo. “Yes. How was the trip home?”

“I really, really like that plane.” I pocketed my phone.

He stepped aside, and I entered. My stuff was all over the living room, neatly piled, but the room still looked as

if someone had been crashing on his couch without paying rent.

“Did the police question you?” he asked.

I was a little taken aback, and it must have been all over my face. “How did you know?”

“It’s all over the society pages. And the *LA Times*, you know... It’s news if it’s about rich people beating their wives.”

“She’s not his wife, and he didn’t beat her.” I defended him and his word, knowing that the truth and Jonathan had a passing, convenient acquaintance.

“Not in the conventional sense.” He placed his laptop on the kitchen bar and spun it so I could see the screen.

Then he set about making coffee as if he didn't want to look at my reaction.

The Celebrity section. A section I ignored because Gabby had always read, assimilated, and digested the entire thing every morning, distilling it for me over breakfast. I was grateful I wasn't in the habit of looking at it because the day after Jonathan was arrested at Santa Monica airport, a picture of him and his *ex-wife* appeared in Rumors Bureau column. It was the only mention of his arrest anywhere in the news, and it was short, with little but a wedding picture of two people happy to commit to each other. The burning jealousy that bubbled from my gut left an awful taste on the

back of my tongue. He was mine. I owned him. Those pictures were lies.

“Monica?” Darren watched me as he filled the pot with water.

“What?”

“Are you okay?”

“It barely says anything. Arrested at the airport on domestic abuse charges brought by his ex-wife. History of kinky activity. Wife declines comment because she’s ‘too upset,’ Oh, and I’m an unidentified female passenger. His little trick fuck whore. Remind me never to look at the internet again.” I pushed the laptop away and turned to my pile of crap. I could have stalled and pretended to rummage through my stuff, but I knew exactly where that manila envelope was.

I ran my hands over it, the aged edges, the curled flap.

“That what I think it is?” Darren asked.

“Yeah. Did you open it?”

“It’s long and involved, so I just put it back.” He looked at me over the edge of his coffee cup.

“Great. Long and involved.” I slid out the contents. Eight and a half by eleven printed pages, stapled. About twenty pages, pure text. Double-spaced with wide margins. Markings all over it in red pencil. Lines. Scribblings. Hash marks. Slashes. Across the top: *Lloyd Willman/Evert Toth, ed.*

“It looks like someone’s term

paper.”

He looked over my shoulder. “I think the ed. means *editor*. My first assumption was that it was a newspaper article.”

“Fan-freaking-tastic.”

“And unpublished, looks like. Or it wouldn’t look like something someone handed in for eleventh grade finals. My sister was a scary girl. I think digging dirt on people was more fun for her than actually trying to get them to sign her.”

“When do you have to leave?” I asked.

“Fifteen minutes.”

I threw myself on the couch. I flipped through. All words and marks. I looked up at Darren, who was wiping

down the counter. I cleared my throat.

He didn't look up when he said,
"You're stalling."

"Why would I stall?"

"You tell me."

I had a hundred answers.

*Because I know half-truths and
pieces of a story.*

*Because I'm committed to a man
who is still a mystery to me.*

*Because I love him, and I will
stand by him, no matter what the
papers say.*

Because Jonathan lies.

So I didn't answer but tilted my
head down and read.

Chapter 8.

The star of the article was the rain.

There had been a winter of storms. I was nine. Dad was away, as usual. Christmas sucked because we were broke and the crawlspace flooded. Pebbles from the driveway of what became the Montessori school came in on a tide of floodwater, pecking the north side of the house for hours.

I hadn't done the math before. Why would I? Why would I remind myself that I was in third grade when he was busy having sex and falling in love? But that was the year I learned multiplication and long division and the

year Jonathan lost Rachel.

The story wasn't much different than I'd imagined. A party had started out as a family affair for Sheila Drazen, and it became wilder and more drug-infused once the adults left and the kids arrived. The police found a bong containing chartreuse absinthe, the remnants of White Widow bud, and sixteen-year-old Jonathan S. Drazen III's DNA.

What happened after was the stuff of police procedurals, but according to witnesses, Jonathan argued with his girlfriend, Rachel Demarest. She grabbed his keys and ran into the rain. Everyone assumed she was keeping his fucked-up ass from driving. The next

morning, Jonathan was found passed out on the muddy front lawn of a house a quarter mile off, and his waterlogged car was found on the beach three miles south with no girlfriend in it. A day and a half later, he was committed to Westonwood after an almost successful suicide attempt. It wasn't a half-hearted cry for help; he did almost die of heart failure.

Three months in Westonwood. The place was known for its lockdown: no phone, no radio. Nothing. A prison for the rich and disturbed.

But while he was away, his world was not quiet. What had happened during the rains had rippled outward in those months, and the Drazens had

deflected and shrouded all of it.

Rachel's body wasn't found, and her death dissolved an already troubled family. The police had been to the Demarest house for over a dozen domestic disturbances over six years. Neighbors told stories of sexual abuse by her biological father, and near constant yelling and fighting after her stepdad moved in. Rachel had found solace in her classmate Theresa, who opened the Drazen home to her for study.

In the months before the accident, according to Rachel's mother, Rachel started coming home with gifts. Pearl earrings. Gold bracelet. A new laptop. She became closed and distant. When police questioned Mrs. Demarest about

the gifts, she threw around accusations. She didn't believe her daughter had had an accident. She wanted the matter looked into because Rachel had been intoning that the Drazen family wasn't all they were cracked up to be. She called the *LA Times*, who interviewed her and dismissed her as a crackpot, and the *LA Voice*, which seemed to be the paper the article was written for.

Suddenly, she didn't want to talk to anyone. She called everything off and became non-responsive to further investigation. No interviews, and only the required police depositions, which she attended with a very expensive lawyer.

The Demarests had been paid off, that much was clear, and the article ended right there, mid-sentence.

“What the fuck?” I said. “Even this thing is half a fucking story.”

Darren stepped into his shoe. “What’s it say?”

“His girlfriend from sixteen years ago died under suspicious circumstances, and the family paid off anyone associated with it. Or got them fired. For all I know, the rest of the article is about who they killed.”

“You gonna tell him?”

I slid the papers back in the envelope. “How can I? I don’t know if any of this is true. It could be someone’s

idea of a short story. He's got enough shit going on without me coming to him with this....this.... I don't even know what this is."

"Gabby's causing trouble from the grave." He shrugged on his jacket. "I like that."

"You would. Can I use your computer? I want to look up some of this."

"Yeah. Not that I care, but will you be here when I get back? You look like you got your walking shoes on."

"I'm going home today." I glanced at my pile of crap, wondering if I could make it on one trip.

"I'm thinking about Gabby's room."

“Move in.”

“Did you ask?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I’ll ask daddy if it’s ok if a boy lives with me.”

I thought that was hilarious. Darren didn’t.

Chapter 9.

The all-knowing internet revealed a big fat goose egg, but I was never much of a researcher. I did find Evert Toth, who had a masthead listing as managing editor of *elLay Rag*, a local left-wing free paper picked up in coffee shops all over the city. Though one might assume such a paper was trash from front to porn-filled back, it wasn't. Some of the biggest exposes, blown whistles, and no-bullshit journalism happened inside. I called the paper, got routed all over the place, and finally ended up on voice mail. I left a message.

I walked home, phone in hand, unwilling to put it in my pocket. I had

something else to do. Someone else to call.

I was many things. I was submissive. I was masochistic. I was trusting. I was a sexual slave. But obedient?

Not as much.

I rooted around my bag and found a matte white card. I stopped at the corner because if I waited until I got home, I might change my mind. I dialed the number. The voice that came over was silky smooth, betraying nothing, giving nothing.

Hello, you've reached the workshop of Jessica Carnes. Please leave a message after the tone, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible. If

you are a curator calling to schedule a studio visit, please press five.

I choked a little. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to probe her plans. I wanted to represent myself as her friend and ally to bring back information to Jonathan, but I suddenly felt highly unqualified to protect him.

I almost hung up, but her caller ID would reveal who I was, and if I hung up, I'd look weak and manipulative. She wouldn't trust me. She'd use me. I needed her to respect me if I wanted her to attempt to partner with me.

“Hi, Jessica. This is Monica Faulkner. I'd like to take you up on your offer to talk if it's still on the table.

Thanks.”

I hung up before I could say something stupid or laugh nervously.

Fuck.

What did I just do?

Chapter 10.

The Stock was busy. Super busy. Wall-of-drunk busy. Ass-pinched-turn-around-and-I-can't-tell-who-did-it busy, especially considering rain threatened on the horizon. I put on a happy face, but my preoccupation reduced the power of my customer-service smile. I couldn't check my phone while I was working, and I needed to know if Jessica had called me back. I wanted to see Jonathan's texts, because I was sure there was at least one.

I barely had time for a break, but I ran to the bathroom. On the way out, I saw Debbie.

“I'm going at midnight,” she said.

“Robert’s handling the tips.”

My disappointment must have shown on my face. Not about Robert managing the tips. The system for their division was fool-proof, which was good since Robert needed a system with exactly that name.

“What?” she asked.

“I wanted to talk to you after the shift.”

She looked at her watch. “You have four minutes.”

“I don’t want to say it so fast I offend you and lose my job.”

“So don’t.”

I’d rehearsed it a billion times, but there was no neutral way to ask. “You told me I shouldn’t have taken

Jonathan seriously, and you told him I'd moved on."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't understand the question. He's not usually serious. It looked to me like you'd moved on." She shrugged as if everything had been on the up and up.

I started to feel like maybe it had been, and I was the one who had the problem. "I'm sorry to be blunt, but it gave me the impression, well...that it was..." I stopped. How had I painted myself into such a corner?

Debbie just waited for me to get myself out. She didn't say a word or look impatient.

“Why do you want us together?” I asked. I managed to not use the word *manipulative*.

“You think I’m motivated by something other than friendship?”

“I don’t pretend to know.” Another wait. I felt as if I could hear the seconds go by.

Debbie didn’t look at her watch, and there was no clock in the hall, but when she straightened a fraction and said, “Time’s up,” I knew she was right to within the second.

Break over. Time to get back on the floor. The second half of my shift passed painfully but quickly. Every douchebag with a Hugo Boss suit or

Audi keys made me want to scream. The intensity must have served me well, because my tips were more than I'd ever seen. I started to think about putting some cash away in my dwindling savings account or buying myself more pretty things to wear under my dresses.

I was snapping my locker closed when Robert came up, a little self-important swagger in his gait.

“Someone’s here for you.”

I didn’t want to smile, but I did. Jonathan had come, obviously. “I’ll be right up.”

He turned and walked off, calling behind him, “She’s by the bar.”

“Ok, thanks.”

She?

Chapter 11.

I went upstairs with less anticipation, less heightened awareness than I would have if I thought I was meeting Jonathan. It was probably Yvonne or some random friend who was passing by and wanted to hit an after-hours.

Seeing a bar after closing, with the lights on and the music off, is much like seeing a beautiful woman without makeup. All the parts are there but made unappealing. Glasses thunk against bus trays, squeaky-wheeled press buckets make their way across the floor behind the slap and swoosh of grey-fringed mops. The staff laughs at each other's

jokes, which are invariably on customers. Guests lingered, mostly in earnest conversations about the next destination for drinking or fucking. Some clung by their fingernails, as if a change of venue would break a spell.

In the case of the Stock, the city had darkened beneath us as much as it ever would, and the sky was a burnt orange with reflected light. It was one fifteen in the morning. I had a pocket full of cash. Maybe I'd go the hell out and talk to people. Maybe I'd cling to a venue until four a.m. to avoid sleeping in my house for the first time in weeks.

But I wasn't going out. I wasn't getting drunk, and I wasn't reacquainting myself with anyone. Only one woman

was at the bar. It was Jessica, and she was not alone. Jonathan stood over her, and they were arguing fiercely. They looked like a married couple on the verge of a blowout, talking over each other, tense hands in front of them. I didn't want to approach them. But something else took over.

She wasn't supposed to talk to him. She wasn't supposed to be in fifty feet of him. He was mine. I had a reaction that could only be described as biological. Rage filled my blood from some angry gland until my fingertips clenched and my teeth ground together.

Jonathan looked up. As soon as he saw me, he came my way like a torpedo.

“What the fuck?” I said.

He gripped my shoulder and spun me around. “Walk.”

“No.” He pushed me toward the back room. I shrugged him off. “I want to talk to her. That’s why she’s here.” He took my bicep and yanked me off the floor. “Get off me.”

He didn’t listen. He pulled me through the halls, past the few coworkers left, along the concrete floors of the back hallways. His face was stern and blank, a fixed mask of intention. He pushed me into the break room, locked the door, and drew shades over the window to the hall. When he finally faced me again, I pushed him away.

“Don’t you *ever* do anything like that again,” I said.

He pressed me against the wall and put his face to mine in a punishing kiss. I gave in to the heat, the urgency of his mouth on mine, his tongue demanding response, his hands still pushing my shoulders. I groaned into him, my voice a breath I had no choice but to take.

“I told you not to meet with her,” he said, face near enough to kiss me again.

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“Oh no?”

“Dragging me away from a conversation, trying to isolate me, you’re giving her quite a case.”

“Pick up your skirt.”

“Using sex to control me...”

“Show me your cunt, Monica.”

I felt a pool of arousal below my waist at the command. Though Jonathan didn't hold my arms, his grip on my shoulders made skidding my hands over my skirt uncomfortable and awkward. I pinched the fabric and bent my wrists, hiking up the skirt one inch, then two. I got a fistful of cotton and yanked. The whole thing rode up as our eyes met, our breath mingling.

“So, what? You going to fuck me now?”

“I am.”

“You think that's going to stop

me?”

He put a hand at my throat, fingertips at the base of my jaw, forcing me to look at the ceiling. The restriction and posture sent a tidal wave of desire between my legs. I wanted to wrap them around him and take him inside me.

“I’ve never punished you, goddess. But I will.”

“Go on. I’m not scared of you.”

He looped his fingers in my panties and drove his fingers along my wet cleft. I gasped and moaned when he thrust two fingers in me. When he pulled them out, I felt their loss. I wanted to be filled with him, despite the fact that he was pissing me off, or because of it. Pressing his torso to mine and keeping

his hand on my jaw, he put his wet fingers in my mouth.

“This mouth is mine,” he said. “It doesn’t talk unless I tell it to.”

The taste of my sex filled my mouth as he drove his fingers down my throat. I sucked them clean to please him, to please myself. The sensations caused by his forcefulness were overpowering.

He took his hand off my throat and ran it along my belly, to my thighs, inside them. He found the crotch of my panties and pulled them off. Then, without a pause, he pushed me onto the lunch table. The metal legs scraped the linoleum as he slid me back and bent my

legs so my sopping pussy lay before him.

“You’re not fucking my decision out of me.”

Standing between my legs, he unbuckled his belt. “Don’t make me gag you.”

I held up my middle finger. He smiled as if he couldn’t help it then grabbed my hand and held it down, hard. His thumb dug into my wrist, and I knew my expression broadcast pain. My legs tightened and closed, but he pushed them apart.

“I’m going to fuck you, and you’re going to shut the hell up for the fucking duration.” He drove into me without an ounce more warning. He fucked me as if he owned me, my body bent, powerless,

exposed.

He told me to take it, but he was the one who was doing the taking. He held the meat of my thighs, spreading my legs. The pain of his hands digging into my skin, his banging cock, him standing over me in dominion. I'd never look at those humming fluorescent lights without feeling a buzz in my cunt again.

I got up on my elbows, and he pushed me back down. "Don't move unless I tell you to."

"I'm going to—"

"You are not."

I *was* going to come. A tsunami of pleasure rushed over the horizon, rising waters pooled at my feet, ankles, knees.

I had another half a minute to complete oblivion. But his eyes shut and he grunted, then moaned, pushing into me slowly. He was coming, motherfucker, and he'd never just come because he couldn't help it. Outside the first time he fucked me without a condom, he never lost control. Jonathan's orgasms always had a purpose.

Taking his hands off my thighs, he leaned in. "Give me a number between one and ten."

"Two."

"Forget that, then. Between five and ten."

"Seven."

"That's how many times you're coming before sunrise. But you have to

come home with me.”

“You son of a bitch. We’re playing orgasm games again?” I asked.

“You’re being a poor sport.”

I got up on my elbows, feeling done with that conversation already. “Tomorrow’s my day off, and I want to work on some songs.”

“I have a piano.”

“All my staff pads are at home. All my notes. Forget it.”

He picked me up gently by my biceps, but his fingertips sent bolts of not-so-sexy pain through them. He must have seen me flinch. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll come to your place. Let me

drive. Please. Give me a couple of hours to do nothing but make you squirm.” He tugged at my skirt, and I hoisted myself up so he could get it back in place.

I put my arms over his shoulders and kissed him. I couldn't help it. I had absolutely no choice. His lips sat so close to mine, and they were so responsive. His tongue ignited the smoldering fire between my legs. I wrapped my legs around him, letting his mouth take mine.

“My place until sunrise,” I said as he kissed my jaw, then my neck. “Then you get the hell out so I can get to work.”

“To write,” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“You promise?”

I pulled away. “I might also go to the bathroom once or twice. Do I need to fill out a form or call you first?”

A smile drew across his lips. A joke was incoming, but there was a click as the door was unlocked from the outside. Jonathan got his dick back in his pants before the cleaning crew swung the door open.

Chapter 12.

“Saying I don’t know what I’m dealing with is plain insulting.”

We were on the matte black rocket, which I loved because I had my arms around him, inside his jacket, and I could feel the angles and bumps of his body. I’d tucked my skirt around my thighs to his satisfaction so I wouldn’t expose my pantie-less glory to Los Angeles. Once that was settled, he’d put my helmet on me as if to cut off any further discussion. Talking to him when he was a disembodied voice was hard. I didn’t want to wait until we got to my house to talk to him because we’d be in a private place and he’d try to shut me

up with sex again. It would work, for the hundredth time.

“I’m not insulting you. I’m telling the truth. Jessica can teach Machiavelli a few things,” he said through the speaker in my helmet.

“I need to see your face.”

“You’ll see plenty.”

“Stop the bike.”

We were on Sunset, by the Junction, the one neighborhood where people gathered on the street, walking from bar, to restaurant, to bar, to home.

“We’ll be to your house in eight minutes.”

“Now.”

He stopped at a light and pulled off his helmet. His hair spiked and

curled with the disruption, and when he turned to me, incredulity was in his eyes. I couldn't hear what he said, and I folded my arms. I meant what I said, no matter his unheard response.

He held the corner of the helmet to his lips, and his voice came through my helmet. "You don't get to give orders."

I pulled off my helmet. I could only imagine what it did to my hair, but I was past giving a shit. I put the helmet on the seat and slid off the bike.

"Monica."

"Jonathan."

The light changed. Horns shrieked. Curses cut the night. Jonathan and I stared at each other as our lane

slowly sifted around us.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, paying the flipped birds around us no mind.

“I want to talk, and I want to do it somewhere you can’t fuck me.”

“You think dragging me into a coffee shop is going to stop me from fucking you? Shit, if I want you in the middle of this intersection, I’ll take you.”

He would, too. But also, he wouldn’t.

I stepped away from the bike. A dented Acura came to a screeching halt inches from me.

“Fuck!” Jonathan shouted, swinging his leg over the seat as if he

was about to cradle my broken body in his arms.

The Acura's driver cried obscenities. Something about me being a stupid fucking bitch. Blah blah. I'd been called worse on a random Tuesday night at the bar. I flipped him off without even looking, walking backward, drawing Jonathan out of the street.

But what I considered a meaningless gesture, the driver considered a call to arms. He leaned so far out of the car I had no idea how his foot stayed on the brake. "Get your big flapping twat outta the street, you bitch whore!"

Jonathan put the kickstand down

on the bike, which I didn't understand. Why on earth would he park it in the middle of the street? The light had turned red again, but obviously that was temporary. The guy in the Acura flung some more curses my way. Apparently, he didn't see the guy with the stone-cold expression heading for him. If he did, he might have stopped calling me a fucking skank and started getting into a defensive posture.

Shit.

I darted in front of Jonathan, but he was moving so fast, I had almost no time to get between them. My ass pressed against the door of the car, and Jonathan was nearly there. I held up my hand. "Stop."

“Get out of the way.”

“Hey, bitchface!” said the guy behind me.

“Get the bike, please,” I said to Jonathan.

“Get out of the way.”

“Are you a fucking adolescent? You’re going to get into a fight on Sunset Boulevard? What the fuck? Please, bend me over in the intersection instead.”

“You people are fucking crazy!” said the driver the second before the light changed. Despite the fact that I was practically leaning on his car, he took off.

More honking as Jonathan and I stared each other down in the middle of

the street. More cursing as his bike sat in the middle of the center lane. We had to yell to be heard over the noise.

“Why can’t I meet with Jessica?” I demanded. “Why is it so important to you?”

“You’re asking me *here*?”

“If you can fuck me in the intersection, I can ask questions.” He grabbed my arm. I shook it off.

“You don’t know her! This is a game, and you don’t know the rules. If she gave you her number, it’s because whatever she’s trying to do to me, she’s going to use you for.”

“So you’re protecting yourself,” I said.

“And you.”

“I don’t need protecting,” I yelled. A delivery truck missed me by inches as it tried to make the light. The wind shear thrust me forward a few inches.

“Goddess,” he said, pulling me to him for safety, “you are a shitload of trouble.”

“You sorry you wanted a commitment?” Cars whipped around us at the green, horns screaming again.

“No. You’ve turned my existence into a life.”

An SUV swerved, but we held our gaze. “I’m about to turn it into your death.”

As if daring L.A. drivers to hit a couple in the middle of the street on a

Saturday night, he leaned over and kissed me. I kissed him back. It's not every day you get to flip off a whole city.

Chapter 13.

MONICA

I didn't tell Jonathan my phone had started buzzing while we were in the street. As I dismounted in my driveway, I glanced at it.

Jessica.

As if sensing something was amiss, Jonathan took hold of my wrist. He saw the screen display his ex-wife's phone number in brilliant backlit blue and white. His eyes flicked up to mine, the phone lighting his face from beneath, as the phone purred in my hand like a kitten. His lips tightened.

"What?" I asked.

"You know what."

“I’m not convinced I’m a tool for your destruction. I might be a tool for your salvation. Have you thought of that?”

“What if she told you I fucked her?”

“Did you?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You’ll believe her. And even if you don’t, a part of you will always wonder. She’ll alienate us from each other,” he said.

“I’m insulted by the notion that I’m going to be used to hurt you. I’m not so weak-willed. Not with her or you. I’m going to see her. I’m going to let her

think she's using me, and I'm going to find out what she wants. I'm going to let her think I'm on her side.”

He gritted his teeth. “This is not a woman you take on a fishing expedition.”

“You may not love her any more, but you respect her. Which is more than I can say for how you feel about me.” I walked toward my house. I felt him reach for me, but I was too fast. I jangled my keys and approached my door.

Jonathan came up behind me, pressing his front to my back. “I'm sorry.” He nuzzled my ear.

“No, you're not.” I turned the key.

“I am.”

“Good. I'll let you know how it

goes.”

He reached around and pushed the door open. “My apology doesn’t mean I’m letting you go.”

“I’m going.”

He pushed me in and slammed the door behind him. He reached for my clothes, attacking my mouth with his, lips churning, tongue probing, hands yanking. My hands explored him as well, taking the edges of his clothing and unbuttoning, unzipping, unfolding, exposing whatever piece of skin I could find. He pushed me back into the bedroom, kissing me as he went, stripping my shirt. He thrust me against the doorframe and lifted my bra,

exposing my hard nipples. His tongue found them, then his teeth. I held the back of his head as his hand found my other breast and twisted the nipple he wasn't sucking. My fingers ran through his hair, and my legs wrapped around him. I felt his erection, hard and hot, pressing into me as he shifted and dropped me through the doorway. We fell onto my bed.

He pulled his shirt over his head, exposing his tight, lean frame. I reached for his chest, but he held my hands down and kissed my neck then my breasts, biting where curve met plane.

“Oh! Yes.”

“Hurt?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice husky with lust. “Again.”

He did, biting and sucking the skin of my neck and breasts. I thought I'd explode. The pain was alive, coursing through my body, a sensation like pleasure but hard, cruel, heated. He opened my legs while sucking the skin of my shoulder. My pussy was ready for him. He put his head between my legs, kissing me from knee to the curve where thigh met pelvis.

“Ah, yes,” I cried.

He slapped inside my thigh, and the sting went right to my pussy. When he leaned in and bit where he'd slapped, gently, then harder, I uttered affirmations. I didn't want him to stop. I wanted to feel it. All of it. His tongue

slid over my clit while he bent my legs to my chest, his teeth on my wet cleft. His fingers scratched my skin and landed in my hole, thrusting inside. It felt, raw, passionate, all-consuming.

He sucked my clit, and the pain made bookends for the pleasure, heightening it. Reaching with his other hand, he put three fingers in my mouth, and I felt bound and helpless, like a hooked fish. The pain was my only companion as the flood of pleasure came. I screamed into his fingers, arching my back and ass off the mattress.

He kept me immobile with his teeth, fingers, and tongue, licking and sucking until even the pleasure was pain, and tears streamed down my face. He

picked up his face, kissing inside my thighs, my belly, licking the diamond navel ring that came to signify his ownership of me. I breathed heavily, eyes half-closed in post-orgasmic rapture.

“I’m going to be sore all over tomorrow.”

He kissed my cheek, pulling one knee back up to my chest, gently pushing my calf until it rested over his shoulder. “You have no idea how sore you’re going to be.”

I was so wet from his mouth and my own arousal that he slid all the way into me in one stroke.

“Do it.” I gasped. “Make me sore.

Make it hurt again.”

“I can make it hurt. You know your safe word?” He fucked me slowly, knees under him, my leg over his shoulder.

“Small, orange fruit.” I felt another orgasm scratching and mewling at the door. It wanted in, but Jonathan had to turn the handle.

“I need you to promise me something,” he said.

“Anything.”

“You’ll let me take care of my business.” He fucked me harder, leveraging himself by gripping my bicep.

“Yes.”

“You won’t interfere.” He went deep into a thudding pain inside.

“Yes, sir.”

“Say it.”

“Sir. I won’t interfere. Just do it. Please.” He slapped my breast, then grabbed it painfully before he slapped it again. “Yes!” I cried.

He continued, hurting me just enough to heighten sensitivity, hitting me with exuberance as I cried *yes, yes* so he wouldn’t stop. He hit my breasts, my ass, my inner thighs without humiliation or punishment. Only joy. He did it because I liked it, and he liked it. Together, we were red-faced, near laughing, sometimes screaming, twisting, begging, fucking deep and hard, shamelessly gratifying each other’s most

secret needs.

And when the thunderclouds gathered, coalescing into a solid wall of sensation, blocking out the sun and sky, I had his name on my lips. Pain and pleasure became indistinguishable, and I shut down into a clenching ball of *now*. His face was close to mine. I was twisted in a knot from the pressure he put on my knees and elbows and exposed sensitivities. I caught the last of his orgasm as my sky cleared and I could see the firmament again. He dropped his head in the crook of my neck and bit. The pain brought me back to myself, like a wakeup call from a dead sleep.

When his mouth slackened and his groans stopped, I said, "Ouch."

“Sorry.”

I turned my head toward him and laughed at the absurdity of it. He caught on and laughed with me, holding my head close as we kissed, smiling. I untwisted myself and lay flat, joints and muscles loosened. I knew I'd suffer tomorrow from our fucking, as well as the promise I had no intention of keeping.

Chapter 14.

JONATHAN

I ordered breakfast from the diner around the corner, and when the delivery guy rang the doorbell, I was on the patio setting out plates. I heard the bathroom door shut. She was awake.

What Monica didn't know, and what helped me sleep, was that her house had been swept twice for cameras while she'd spent weeks crashing on her friend's couch. The place was clean, so I felt fine about giving her the roughest fuck I'd given anyone in my life. Even with Sharon, who'd suffered getting shit beaten out of her to the point of an emotional breakdown, I'd been more

careful. She was breakable. Others had done a good job of proving that.

Monica, on the other hand, was made of tough stuff. That toughness was showing in her insistence on seeing my ex-wife. I had a gut feeling that by seeing Jessica on her terms and her turf, Monica would be walking into more than she could handle. She thought they would have a conversation, but it would be a game. The end result would be us separated by my ex-wife's casual half-truths and outright lies.

The idea that I could keep tabs on Monica until the whole thing went away looked more and more impossible. I couldn't suddenly restrict her. She was used to being her own woman. She had

to work, and she had to play music. I couldn't put a team of people on her when she'd just gotten over the cameras in the house. I had to make her not *want* to see Jessica, and the only way to do that was to make the trouble she was causing seem unimportant. It was a good strategy, and I was failing at it.

She came out as I finished putting out her tea. She wore a long-sleeved, black turtleneck and skinny jeans. She walked stiffly, but her smile was loose and relaxed.

“Good morning,” I said.

“The king sets the table.”

“He's hungry.” I put my hands at her neck and kissed her. Her lips

tightened. I pulled back and saw what had made her flinch—a tiny smear of reddish-grey where my fingertip had touched her jaw. Stroking her collar away, I saw that her neck was covered in bite marks and bruises. “Jesus Christ.”

She refolded the collar until her neck was covered. “I didn’t know whether to show you or not.”

“Up.” I tugged at the hem of her sweater. She bit her lip. “Come on.”

“The last time I looked like this, you felt too bad about it to fuck me.”

I pulled up the shirt. She lifted her arms, her face contorted in pain. I pulled the sweater off completely, and she tucked her head so the collar would

expand around her. She stood before me, naked from the waist up, looking as though she'd been beaten in a back alley. The curves under her breasts were deep red where blood vessels had broken under my teeth, and the mounds themselves were bruised. The bend of her neck had the same beaten mottle. Her biceps were blackened in fingertip shapes. I touched them lightly, drawing my fingers down to the striated ligature marks on her elbows.

“Your knees?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Matching marks on those. You tied me really tight.”

“You said it felt okay.”

“It did.”

“Your thighs? Your ass?”

“I’m fine.” She put her hand on my face, but I didn’t want to be comforted. I unbuttoned her pants.

“Come on,” I said. “Let me see.”

She slid her pants down, pain on her face. She’d have to put them back on and that would hurt, but it was too late to undo the order. I kneeled, sliding the jeans over her legs. Her thighs were a mess, and her knees did indeed have matching marks from when I’d tied the joints together with an extension cord.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said, stroking my hair as I kissed her bruised legs.

“I am.”

“I said not to be.”

“I don’t take orders.”

“You should try it. It’s amazing.”

From my kneeling position, I eased her into a chair and spread her legs, kissing the devastation inside them. I didn’t have a mother’s healing kiss on a scratched knee, but I had no other way to show her the pain in my heart at seeing her hurt and knowing that I’d done it and I’d do it again and again.

“You only came six times last night,” I said. “I promised seven.”

“I couldn’t take another.”

I probed her folds with my tongue. “Take it now.”

“I need my tea,” she groaned, running her fingers through my hair. I didn’t touch her with anything but my mouth. My hands had done enough damage. Though pain had been welcome a few hours earlier, the aftermath would be straight pain, without the accompaniment of pleasure. I wove my arms around her until her hands found mine, and I clasped them as my mouth worked in service to her. Gently. Without urgency. Her sweet, sore cunt tasted coppery, like raw flesh but got wet and responsive, her clit filling into a hard, slick pebble under me.

She groaned as I worked her with my tongue and lips, teeth tucked safely

away. I looked up at the broken skin of her chest, making eye contact as her lips whispered my name, and I prayed to whatever deity would listen to please, please not take her away. She arched, clenched, gasped like the beautiful kitten she was. When I leaned up to her, fresh cunt on my lips, my phone dinged.

“You gonna get that?” she asked.

“When I’m done kissing you.” I put my hands on the arms of her chair and slowly put my lips on hers. I wanted an unrushed moment of forgiveness and gentleness.

“Can you make love to me?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why not?” She drew her legs

around me. I knew it hurt.

“I’m flattered, but I’m simply not attracted to you.”

She had her hand on my erection before I could back away. “Really?” She smiled, kissing me, stroking me.

“That? That’s nothing. Something I left in my pocket.” She could stroke my dick all day, but there was no way I was taking her in the condition she was in.

“Please? I’ll beg.”

“Tempting offer. But I’m hungry.” I pulled away. As I went to sit down for breakfast, my phone dinged again, then rang.

“You’d better check it,” Monica said, pulling her sweater back over her

head. “Could be a towering inferno at Hotel K and you didn’t know about it because you were eating eggs.”

I checked. Margie. And it was Sunday. I looked at Monica then pocketed the phone.

“Jonathan, I see your face. Take the call, would you?” She stepped into her jeans gingerly, eyes like chocolate coins, looking at me as if I was being serious over nothing.

“Save me some,” I said as I started to step away from the table.

“You got enough for an infield and everyone in the dugout.”

I slipped my phone out of my pocket and walked down the stairs to the driveway. With one look back at my

goddess buttoning her pants, I answered the phone. “Margie. Working on the Lord’s day?”

“Your problems never rest, Jonny. Your beautiful and talented ex-wife wants a meeting.”

“Today?” I climbed up to Monica’s front porch, noticing the cracked, slipping foundation still hadn’t gotten fixed.

“Tuesday. And in other bad news, are you sitting?”

“Out with it.” I sat on the porch swing. It creaked.

Margie took a deep sigh of a breath, which she never did, because she was utterly unflappable.

“Come on. Speak. I’m sitting.”

“It’s Rachel.”

My brain stopped functioning.

“Jonny?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Why did you move her a month ago?”

I heard Monica getting plates and silverware together. If I could hear her, she could hear me unless I was careful. Even if I remained cryptic, Monica had enough intellectual curiosity to connect the dots into the shape of a web of lies.

“I moved her to protect someone.”

“Monica? Or yourself?”

“Yes. I’m a selfish prick. I have someone I don’t want to lose, and I

needed to protect that. If I left her where she was, Jessica could have shown Monica where she was. I needed to maintain a little plausible deniability.”

I had panicked very badly when Debbie called six weeks ago and said Jessica had shown up at the Stock and said something so upsetting to Monica that she was visibly shaken. I'd been convinced Jessica insinuated things about Rachel. Because everyone in the world who had cared about her, and there were painfully few, thought she was dead.

She wasn't. Not quite.

Jessica knew everything. At our engagement party, I'd been hypnotized as a party joke and remembered what the

whiskey had blacked out. Rachel had survived the crash. She didn't walk away. But on the night of the Christmas rains, she'd been pulled out of the ocean with a part of her brain intact. Jessica had helped me find Rachel and helped me move her. She'd helped me fail in finding her family. Mother dead. Father disappeared. Her stepfather had never been worthy of her. Jessica, by my side, had reminded me to man up and take responsibility for my part in her condition.

“Okay, I know you did your best,” Margie said, her tone promising bad news. “But people in vegetative states don't travel well. I just got word from

the new facility that she has pneumonia.”

“She’s had it before.”

“She’s dying, little brother. I’m sorry.”

Chapter 15.

MONICA

Jonathan left me with a lot of breakfast.

He'd come back without any color in his face, looking as if he was miles away. With no chance in hell of talking him into a good-bye screw, I walked him out.

“I’m going to be gone for a few days,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“We talked about this. You travel. It’s fine.”

He stood half on the porch, half on the steps when he turned back to me. “You promised you wouldn’t see my ex-wife.”

That was a hard comment to answer. If I told him I had every intention of seeing Jessica, he'd worry needlessly. If I said otherwise, I'd be lying. "Jonathan, honestly, promises made while I'm in a submissive posture shouldn't count."

He paused, looking at our clasped hands. "Probably not."

Even though it hurt to lift my arms, I put my palms on his cheeks. He did not look well. His skin was cold. There really must have been a towering inferno at Hotel K.

"I have a meeting with her on Tuesday," he said. "Can you wait until after that?"

“I don’t see why not.”

My sneaky non-promise must have been completely transparent to him. There was a pretty good chance the only time I’d get to see her was when he was out of town and unable to use his dick to lure me away. He knew it. I knew it. Pretending otherwise was absurd. Yet we did. Somehow, he was willing to take the chance and walk down the steps to his bike after a deep, soulful goodbye kiss that let me know he was still my master and king.

I cleaned up breakfast and dressed to rehearse. I had a lot to say about pain and its relationship to desire, glory, satisfaction. Maybe I had too much to

say, because I wrote a seven-page ramble of a song with three alternating choruses and verses up the wazoo. I still felt as though I hadn't scratched the surface.

My body ached. I was tired. I felt isolated. Jonathan's touch stayed on me in the soreness between my legs, the rawness of my lips, the sharp bite of pain when I moved my arms. I pulled my collar up over my face to see if his smell lingered. It did, if only slightly, and I kept the collar up even though it increased the heat of my longing with every breath.

A couple of days. How could I last that long? How would I think about anything else? And what would happen

on the next two-week trip? Did he think I would agree to come with him every time?

When I realized I'd been staring at the piano keys for twelve minutes, I shut off the metronome and crawled into bed. Our scents lingered on the sheets like the twin deities, pain and pleasure, lulling me to sleep with thoughts of their harmonized perfection.

Chapter 16.

MONICA

I woke when the sky was melting from light to dark, and the nest of crickets outside my window started screaming their mating call. Every living thing was trying to fuck, except me. My aches took on a new level of sharpness after a decent rest, and the smell of sex exhausted me. I stripped the bed.

I'd brought piles of clothes back from Darren's. I hadn't done laundry in his building unless it was absolutely necessary, but I was home now. The sheets needed doing, and the towels, and my clothes, obviously. The Bordelle underthings I hand-washed lovingly,

caressing them the way he did.

I passed Gabby's closed door a dozen times. That part of the house was as much mine as it ever was, but I still couldn't go in without Darren. I still braided my hair for her. I still kept what little music she'd written to integrate into my mine, to save her name and her legacy.

The battery on my phone had died, so I plugged it in and went about cleaning my bathrooms, mopping the kitchen floor, doing all the things I'd neglected while I was away. In my mind, the metronome ticked in four-four time. A song was bubbling up, and my verbal mind waited patiently while my non-verbal brain processed the point and

purpose of it.

I was on the porch shaking the dust out of the couch throws when the phone blooped. It must be Jonathan saying something that would make me smile. I ran to it.

—are you there?—

—I feel your hands on the phone—

—Can't. Just checking in. I feel good knowing you're there, and mine—

The subtext was he felt good knowing I was there and doing what he told me. Which meant, no Jessica. He either thought very little of me believing I was obedient, or a lot believing I'd get the right message from so few words. Or

maybe I should just take it at face value.

Bored, I checked my email from the phone. I hadn't set up digital roaming while out of the country, and then the phone died, and the fact was, email wasn't my thing. Most of my social interactions were local and done with a phone call or text.

But that couldn't be said for everyone. I'd given Harry Enrich my information after the B.C. Mod show, and shockingly, he'd used it, sending me a personal note early Friday.

Ms. Faulkner,

It was a pleasure to hear your work tonight. I understand Eddie

Milpas has been working to sign you on with us. Why don't you come by our offices Tuesday to discuss further?

Best,

Harry

PS – Do you have representation?

Eddie had been working to sign me? Sounded like he was trying to put a collar on my neck and shackle me to a display case, but who was I to question?

My phone rang while it was still in my hand. I didn't usually answer

numbers I didn't recognize, but the green button was a reflex, and I put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hello." The voice was female and tight as a drum. Pleasant, but not effusive. Welcoming, but not warm. "This is Jessica Carnes. Am I speaking with Monica?"

"Yes." I sat on the piano bench, willing myself not to shake. All of Jonathan's warnings and the events of my two prior meetings with Jessica blew out my nerves. I had to remind myself to channel him, his utter dedication to self-management no matter his feelings.

"How are you?" she asked.

I had no answer prepared. No

story to tell to get what I wanted. “I’m fine. You?”

“Very well, thank you,” she said. I didn’t think I had another nicety left in me, and she saved me from having to come up with another. “You left me a message?”

Oh, she was going to make me ask. She wasn’t giving me an inch or admitting she had made first contact at Frontage. She wasn’t going to admit she’d shown up at my job at whatever o’clock in the morning. “I thought I’d take you up on that offer to meet.”

“Things have gotten a little more complicated since we spoke last.”

“Yes...I...I guess you’re right. I

thought you came to see me last night. Never mind.”

After saying that, I felt a sense of relief. I was avoiding immediate repercussions from seeing Jessica, and it wasn't even my fault. Coward. Yes, that was the craven woman. I wasn't her any more. But I couldn't push Jessica. If she wanted to wiggle out she would, no matter what.

“If you feel differently at some point, I would like to meet. We can do it under your terms and talk about whatever you like,” I said.

“Why the change of heart?”

“Things got more complicated, like you said. I feel like I can't see the whole picture.” That was probably too

specific and would leave me little room to flip my story around if I needed, but that was it. I said it, and it was very close to the truth.

“Can you get to Venice in the morning?”

“Yes.” A lump rose in my throat. I was doing it. I was going directly against Jonathan’s wishes. I had to remind myself that I wasn’t trying to hurt him. I was trying to help him.

“I’ll text you the address.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I had nothing else to say, so I hung up.

I’d started an evil thing and had to go through with it because I wouldn’t stand by and watch him get run over.

Maybe I was going out on a limb, and maybe I'd make it worse, but how could I sit still while someone was trying to hurt him?

“Fuck,” I whispered. My car was at the Stock.

Chapter 17.

MONICA

A black Corvette pulled up in front of the house, taking the downhill nice and slow. Robert cared about his ride the way most people cared about living things. I skipped down the porch and met him at the curb.

“Thanks,” I said, getting in. I was more or less on the way from the valley, but it was still an inconvenience for him.

“Fucking hill, man.” He put the car in gear and inched downward.

“When I was a kid, I rode my bike down it, no hands.”

“Bet you did.” He paused briefly. “So, car’s at work, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“You went home with the guy from Hotel K? Sam and Debbie’s friend?”

“You got a problem with it?”

“Naw, man. Just curious what his deal is.”

I didn’t know what he meant, and I didn’t want to know what he meant, either. I just wanted to get my car. I didn’t want to hear about anything Robert might have seen or heard. Nothing. Not a word.

We sat in silence down Temple, to Hill, around the block a few times or ten until we stopped at a light a block from the hotel. It was the same light

Jonathan had stopped at when he met me after work and told me he'd always love his ex-wife.

“What did you *think* his deal was?” I asked.

Robert snapped out of some sort of reverie. “Huh? Who?”

“Jonathan, the guy from Hotel K?”

“Shit, I don't know. He was there that time you couldn't talk, then gone, then....coupla weeks, he was in the corner yacking with Debbie and Sam all the time. But not when you were there. Shows up last night, you're there. I dunno. Just asking.”

“Asking what?”

“Is it serious or what?”

“Yes. It's serious,” I said.

“All right. Thanks for letting a guy know.”

The light changed, and I laughed to myself.

“What?” He turned into the lot.

“I thought you were going to tell me that you saw him with other women.”

He looked at me and smiled, turning into the employee level. “Guys don’t rat on other guys.”

“Robert! Don’t even—”

“But there was nothing to rat. Seriously. Stop with the girl style. It don’t suit you.” He pulled in next to my little black Honda.

“Fine. I wouldn’t have believed you anyway.” I blooped my car and got

out.

Robert cut the engine and pulled his small black duffel from the back. “You think I’d lie?” He slung the duffel over his muscular shoulder. “I’m not saying I woulda minded getting with you for a night, but I wouldn’t lie to do it.”

“I don’t think you’d lie,” I said, getting in my car. “I think you could misunderstand.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. If I saw him with someone, and it was something, I’d know.”

I looked him up and down. “You know what? I believe you.” I turned the ignition. Nothing happened. Just one

click. “Uh oh. Do you have time to give me a jump?”

“Turn it again.”

I did. One click, then nothing.

“It’s your starter.” He walked to the front of the car and knocked on the hood. “Pop it.”

I did. He lifted the hood and chocked it up with the metal brace.

“Should I turn it again?”

“Yeah.”

I did. Same. I got out and stood next to Robert as he shone his phone’s light at the engine, analyzing the mass of wires, compartments, and hoses. I knew what most of it was but not how to fix it.

“All right. If you got a bad starter,

I can bang it while you kick it over. Sometimes that kinda gets it going. But you need a new one, probably.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, except... It should be right there. Just back of the battery and down, past these wires that serve the electricity. But there's bolt holes. No starter.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked more closely then got under the car. I leaned down, amazed at how he would just crawl under a chassis out of curiosity.

“Do you want a proper flashlight?” I asked. “I think I have one in the trunk.”

“Nope. I'm telling you. There's no

fucking starter on this car. It got jacked.”

“My *starter*? Are they expensive?”

“Three hundred. Two? Look, I know it’s weird but...” He shrugged.

“Oh my God,” I said, realizing who would do the surgery required to remove a starter from a twelve-year-old Japanese car. “Fucking Jonathan. Son of a goddamn bitch.”

He’d stranded me. I couldn’t get out to Venice without a car. A cab would cost a fortune, and if a bus that far out of town even existed, it would take hours one way. I couldn’t get the car fixed in time for a meeting in Culver City in the morning. That was why he’d

left so easily. He walked away accepting that I had no intention of keeping any promise I made while my legs were spread. I should have known better.

“I gotta get to work,” said Robert.

“You wanna call a tow?”

“Nope. I’ll figure it out.”

“How you getting home?”

“I’m not. I’m going to go upstairs and get a whiskey. Then I’m going out. If I can’t drive, I can drink.”

“Debbie’s gonna make you pay for it.”

“Fine. I’m not too broke for a little alcohol.” I took out my phone when we got to the back hall and scrolled to Jessica’s last text. I didn’t want to talk to

her. The ice in her voice put me on edge. I had no idea how I would handle our conversation tomorrow.

“You can get some guy at the bar to buy you a few,” Robert said, stopping by the lockers.

“No way.”

“Why not? It’s just a drink.”

“It’s cheating.”

“Girls are crazy. I’m tellin’ you, if I were a girl and I had a nice pair, I’d never pay for a drink.”

—*My studio in Culver City, then?*—

I loved how she managed to keep it on her turf. If I asked her for an Echo Park location, she’d probably manage to find a place she rented, owned, or

regularly patronized.

“If you were a girl with a nice pair,” I said, “you’d be the one all the guys wanted to fuck but hated. You’d have a string of one-night or one-week stands until the guy saw you letting someone else buy you drinks. Then you’d only attract the guys looking to spend a little money and put their dicks somewhere comfortable. You’d wake up one morning at fifty years old with a pair that wasn’t so nice any more, and you’d wish you’d bought your own.”

Robert and I walked up together. “You don’t know nothing about men. Sure, we might get a drink for a girl like you to get laid. But being seen with you? That’s what gets *other* girls. See what I’m sayin’?”

“No. I’m still buying my own drinks.”

“Whatever.”

I sat in the corner in the same spot Jonathan had been known to occupy and tried to arrange a car for the next morning. Darren had work the next day, but once he found out what I was doing, he refused to let me drop him off in the morning and borrow his car, texting me like he was my fucking therapist:

—You have a way of sabotaging your own happiness. I'm opting out—

A guy with glittering dark brown eyes, messy black hair, and a mouth like a movie star leaned on the bar next to me. “What are you drinking?”

“Piss and vinegar.” I was busy answering Darren’s accusation in a

flurry.

“That a new thing?” he asked.
“What’s in it?”

I pulled my eyes away from my phone for a second. “Piss. Also, vinegar.”

He laughed. Ignoring my bludgeon of a hint, he leaned toward me. “Let me get you your next one. I’ll piss in it myself.”

I slugged the dregs of my whiskey, letting the ice cube linger on my lips. I parted them to touch my tongue to it, reminding me of Jonathan, the master of melting ice. I slid the glass to Mister Eyes and said, “Piss your little heart out.”

He looked at the empty glass then

back at me. I turned to my phone. I should have known better than to be a total bitch, because in L.A. you never knew who you were speaking to, but I missed Jonathan. I was angry at him and I was trying to avoid lashing out.

—Lil can take you anywhere you want to go—

“Someone break your heart today?” Mister Eyes asked.

“No, but really,” I said, “it’s not personal. I’m sure you’re awesome. But there are a hundred girls in here right now who are available. Okay?”

—Please wait until I get back. We can talk—

I slipped my phone into my pocket. When I looked up, Debbie was watching me. That alone was not

abnormal, but I felt as if they were Jonathan's eyes watching me talk to a handsome man, and I was suddenly uncomfortable.

I texted around and got some responses. A party in Koreatown. A show in Silver Lake. Nothing appealed. Fuck going out. I walked out to catch one of the cabs that usually waited outside the hotel. If I was seeing Jessica, I'd need a good night's sleep.

Chapter 18.

JONATHAN

The machines beeped and sighed, blinking like the dashboard on a 747. The room smelled of rubbing alcohol and dying flesh, and in the darkness laid a once beautiful, intelligent woman who had been reduced, by me, to a pile of idly reproducing cells. I'd been driving that night. Drunk. Stoned. Stupid. Then I passively let my family cover it up while I sat in a padded room feeling sorry for myself.

Sixteen years, a dark room, and maybe she would finally get what she'd always wanted. She'd wanted to be free of her family, and by the time Jessica

and I had found her, they were dead or missing. She'd wanted to be free of hunger and pain, and she'd gotten just that. But I didn't think this was what she'd had in mind.

I'd gone from her lover to her guardian because no one else cared. She'd been forgotten, and I was the carrier of her memory. The man who broke her became her keeper. When she'd "died", everyone felt sorry for me. Even though I had no memory of what happened, I knew something was wrong. I knew there was a debt to be paid. When Jessica and I found out she was alive and we'd sent a team of smart men and women to find her, I'd hoped she'd be in some suburban house with two

kids and a dog. But the trail had led us to an expensive, secret facility for people who couldn't move. Fuck, how I'd cried and thanked God and the saints for Jessica's shoulder.

A million years before, we'd lain on our backs on the grass of Elysian Park, where my family would never find us. Rachel liked to wonder what it was like to be me. She thought I had not a worry in the world. Yes, my father was a fucking sociopath, but he didn't stick his fingers inside me like hers had, and he didn't scream and hit me and lock me in the house like her stepfather had. Whatever I endured would end when my trust fund spread its legs at twenty-one.

For her, the light at the end of the tunnel had not appeared.

“Do you wish for things you can’t buy?” she’d asked.

I’d looked over at her. Blades of grass sat in the foreground of my vision, slashing her face, which was turned to me. Her eyes were tobacco brown, wide and light with sun inside them. “You’re fascinated with money,” I said.

“I think I am.” She’d smiled. “It’s made you different, you know. You’re fearless. It’s exciting, kind of. Watching you is like watching someone who’s really, truly free.”

I’d laughed. I never felt free in my life. “What do you wish for? Besides money.”

“You make me sound like a gold digger.”

“You are, but you’re terrible at it. I think a few more years and you’ll be sleeping with the right guy.”

She’d flung herself on top of me and pinched my sides. I laughed and rolled her over until I had her pinned.

“Tell me what you wish for, and if it’s any part of my body, your wish will come true at the Regency Hotel in forty minutes.”

She’d giggled and turned her face to the sunlight. “Free, Jonathan. I wish to be free.”

I’d unpinned one of her shoulders to pluck a seeded dandelion out of the

grass. “Blow.” I held the white puffball in front of her.

She’d blown hard, and the seeds went into my face. We laughed, and blew the rest of the seeds off together, wishing her free from the constraints of her family and her scarcity. They floated away on their sinuous parachutes, like little messengers to God, saying *take me, take me, take me. Set me free.*

Chapter 19.

The bus. West on Sunset. South on La Cienega. Hour and a half. A cab ride from my house to Jessica's studio was fifty bucks one way. I wished I could have taken the hundred for a round-trip cab out of Jonathan's ass, but that would have to wait for another day.

I wore three-quarter sleeves and long pants. I wrapped a scarf with a spider web pattern around my neck to cover the bruises. I felt lucky it was getting cold, but I had no idea how I'd hide the roughness of my private life in the summer.

The walk was a quarter mile, but it was cool, and I'd worn comfortable

shoes. Jonathan hadn't texted me back the night before, nor had I received a nine a.m. ding. Was he angry? Was he shutting me out because I hadn't fallen for the busted starter trick? Or was the emergency that pulled him away so dire he couldn't answer me? Both concerned me. I had a gnawing anxiety that grew worse with every step toward Jessica's studio.

Up ahead, a big white truck was parked and running outside a light industrial building. The building was painted west-side tasteful—charcoal, with white trim and a chartreuse door—and guys in bunny suits trotted in and out with six-inch diameter hoses. I checked the address, and I was sure I had the

right one.

A guy in a polo shirt put orange cones on the sidewalk, stopping me. “Street’s closed.”

“Is that twelve thirty-eight?”

“Sure is.”

“I have an appointment here.”

“Not today, you don’t. Got a lead and asbestos removal team coming in. It’s a hazard, so you’re going to have to go around the block if you want to pass.”

I pulled out my phone. No message. Crossing the street, I craned my neck around the truck and saw Jessica in the side alley, arguing with a guy holding a clipboard. Her smooth veneer was slipping, just a little. It

seemed to be as much of a surprise to her as it was to me.

Of course.

Jonathan.

Well. Didn't that just suck ass.

I started calling him and thought better of it. I texted him and deleted the whole thing. I'd already thrown out one unfounded accusation and gotten no reply. A string of them would do no more than make me look psychotic.

I walked to Washington Boulevard, where I'd at least be able to find a café where I could sit down and blow my cab money. I found a purple building housing a tea shop called Yellow Threat. I got something hot and herbal and sat down on the outdoor

patio.

She texted me soon after.

—So sorry. I'll be held up 30 min—

I felt like her co-conspirator at that point. Jessica and me against Jonathan. I was determined to understand the situation so I could help him. His ex-wife, perfectly content with his broken heart until she saw him with me, was hell-bent on destroying him for money and spite. She wanted to meet so she could use me, and Jonathan wanted to prevent that so I didn't hurt myself or him. Both of them underestimated me.

They forgot I was a musician, that I'd gone to a performing arts school and

been the victim of manipulation and backstabbing. I'd already opened my case and found my strings cut and my staff notes swapped. I'd already been given the wrong time for auditions. I couldn't come out of that world without learning a thing or two.

Jessica and I, working against Jonathan to see each other. Ridiculous, yet somehow inevitable.

I checked my watch. I'd definitely lost a writing day. I wasn't happy about it, but there was nothing I could do but warm my hands on my tea. The sidewalk made the block walkable, but it was empty. The light industrial street had been taken over by architects and

production companies at the turn of the twenty-first century, and they'd painted everything in bright colors and edgy murals. I noticed one of Geraldine's half a block away. She'd painted the side of the building to look as if I could see through it to the highway, as if she wanted to negate whatever happened inside.

I saw him walking across the crosswalk in a dark suit with a blue shirt open at the collar. His black hair caught the wind, and his eyes scanned every plane and surface.

"Mr. Santon," I said when he reached me, "what a coincidence."

"You believe in those?" He sat down.

“No. I’m assuming my lover sent you to talk me out of seeing his ex-wife?”

“Close. But no. I can’t tell you what he hired me to do, except I’m not supposed to be sitting at a table with you.”

“You must have put your own cameras in the house. If you know where I’ve been, I don’t know how. I haven’t seen you.”

“That was off the table, obviously. We’re not watching you. We’re watching the other one. And you’ll never see us, Ms. Faulkner. Any trace of us is gone before we even are.”

“Big scary ops guys. My dad

always said he could take any of you in a brawl.”

“The idea is to avoid the brawl in the first place. Knowing what I know, which is too much, everyone involved wants to avoid a clusterfuck. Except you and Ms. Carnes. So I am going to sit here and enjoy a cup of tea, until night if necessary. If anyone joins you, I’ll be right here. Then I am going to drive you home.”

I leaned forward, elbows on the table. “How do I shake an ops guy?”

“Guys. Plural.” He glanced at a guy on a cell phone halfway down the block. He gestured and spoke loudly to make himself just another piece of furniture. Someone standing quietly with

a phone to his ear would attract notice. Then Santon glanced at a black Toyota at the light and waved to the driver with a flick of his wrist. The driver flicked back and drove off when the light changed.

Great. Even if I ran away and jumped in a cab, I'd have to shake the other two. "He needs to trust my loyalty."

"That's between you and him." He twisted around, hailing a waitress. "Personally, I don't give a shit."

The waitress came, and he ordered himself a cup of coffee and a muffin. She flirted with him, a nervous grin crossing her face. He was a nice-

looking guy. I'd forgotten to notice.

“What’s with the pinkie ring?” I asked when the waitress left.

He held up the simple gold band always present on his pinkie, not an affectation or accessory as I’d assumed. “My wife’s.”

“She wearing yours?”

“Around her neck, with her dog tags. We swapped when we re-upped. Weren’t there four weeks when she took sniper fire half a mile from the Green Zone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was messy. Death always is.”

“You understand, I’m just trying to protect him.”

“I’m just trying to do my job.”

I sipped my tea, and we sat in silence as his coffee was brought. A black Mercedes stopped at the light. A blonde driving. Jessica. The parking lot was around the corner, and her blinker flashed for the turn.

I looked at Santon, and though his eyes appeared to be on the scalding black coffee he was about to swallow in a single gulp, he gazed in the halfway point between the table and the street. Blank sidewalk, but Jessica and I would be in his peripheral vision.

Jessica saw me, and I shook my head. She nodded and turned off her blinker. Will Santon could take me home. Motherfucker.

Chapter 20.

I knew Will wasn't gone for good. I had a gig at Frontage that was well-attended, including a table of five guys in agent-gear by the warm speakers. I greeted them, played, and said goodbye with a stinker of a smile, but my heart felt made of lead. Jonathan hadn't called, texted, written. No contact besides Will Santon's unwelcome presence.

Could he be that mad?

Was that *how* he got mad? Falling off the face of the earth? How was I supposed to react?

Irrelevant questions. What I needed to ask myself was how I *wanted*

to react. So I called him. It went to voice mail, which I didn't want. There would be no angry, terse, or blustery messages. I texted.

I had friends who had given men their hearts only to find them turned to ice directly after. Or slept with them after declarations of indefinite amounts

of attraction, but the indefinite amounts lasted no more than a week. I wondered if that was what I was dealing with. Had my commitment to him chased him away? Or did he expect my submission to be an abdication of control over my decisions? Was obedience required inside and outside the bedroom? Had I missed that point on the list?

I couldn't have. I never would have allowed it, and neither would he.

I had just gotten home when my phone blooped. I dug around my bag and found it, hoping against hope that it was Jonathan. An outsized level of disappointment flooded me. It was Jessica.

—I'm at Make on Echo Park and Baxter. I believe you're nearby?—

That presented a problem. It was a block and a half away, but I had to get there. I believed Santon when he said I wasn't being watched, but Jessica was. That meant something or someone would stop us from meeting in that block and a half.

Fuck it.

I looked out the back door. My house was built on a lot that was nearly vertical toward the rear. A retaining wall of cinderblock held the hill at bay, barely. Behind it, untouched chaparral stretched five hundred feet to a walkable

dirt alley kids used to get into trouble. The whole stretch was unlandscapable without a bunch of money, which Dr. Thorensen had, apparently. His plot was terraced into vegetable gardens, private spaces, and a little utility area with a shed. My part of the hill, naturally, had fallen to scrub and brush. A hundred-year-old ficus with exposed roots was on the downslope, and wildflowers bloomed in spring. In the first weeks of December, dead thorns twisted around the trees, weeds turned to sticks, and brown was the new black.

I'd have to go through that to get to the path, then get spit out onto Echo Park Avenue. Of course, it wouldn't work. I'd get bitten by a rattlesnake or

something. Worse, Santon, who'd probably taken a vow to never sleep again, would be waiting for me on the street.

I dug my old cowboy boots out of the back of the closet, and a pair of jeans I didn't care about. I'd spent the whole day trying to get this done, and I wasn't giving up yet.

My yard needed some love. I hadn't trimmed anything at the end of summer, so the flagstones and garden patches were covered in dead leaves and detritus. I tossed the pink and orange balls back over the fence to the Montessori school and made for Dad's tangerine tree. He'd planted it for me

before he and Mom moved away, saying it would feed me if I got hungry. It just kept growing and was high enough to hug the spaghetti of power lines crisscrossing the sky. I used it as leverage to climb the wall onto the overgrown slope.

It was pitch dark back there. The path was no more than a right-of-way between the backs of houses. Echo Park and Silver Lake were full of untended spaces. Staircases built during the Depression, forgotten paths that were never lit or patrolled that were taken over by residents for extra garden space or burial grounds for unwanted cars.

I grabbed saplings and vines to pull myself up the hill. There was

garbage everywhere. Just as I was thinking about how I had to get up there in the daytime with a few plastic bags and clean it out, I was pushed into the ficus.

“Where are you going, goddess?” His voice came from behind me.

His breath in my ear, his scent in my nose, the feel of his chest on my back, the way he fit like a puzzle piece... I didn't even want to ask him what the fuck he was doing in the woody part of my backyard.

“You didn't call.” I leaned my head back and exposed my throat. He made me forget everything when he unlooped my scarf and put his mouth on

my neck, his lips a lightning rod for the electricity to my core.

“I was busy. I’m sorry.” His teeth found the place where my neck met my shoulder, and he gifted me a little crush of pain that translated directly to pleasure. I sucked in my breath. He ran his hands down my arms, to my hands.

“Apology rejected. Return to sender.”

Knotting his palms to the backs of my hands, he pressed them to the tree trunk.

“Spread your legs,” he said in my ear. I wasn’t fast enough. He kicked them apart. He was so fucking rough, and the precarious feeling of not knowing what he’d do next sent a gush of

moisture between my legs.

How long would Jessica wait? Until tomorrow. Because Jonathan had appeared, and his hands were on my stomach, pushing up my bra. He pressed my bruised places gently while finding the untouched spots and pushing his hands against them until I groaned.

“You want something?” he asked.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” His voice softened as if he meant it, and his hands drifted down to my waistband.

“Are you going to fuck me?”

He unbuttoned my jeans and unzipped without answering, pressing his cock against my ass. I ground against

him. “God, I want to.” He took my right hand from the tree trunk and, still pressing my left to the tree, he slid it down my pants. “But it looks like you’re going somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“You wet?”

I ran my finger to my hole and felt the sopping, slick mass under it. “Yes.”

He removed his hands from mine but curved his body around me, his front to my back, his voice in my ear. “How wet?”

“Fuck-me-now wet.”

“Touch your clit. Do it so it feels good.”

I rubbed my engorged member with one finger, circling it, pushing

myself into him.

“Two fingers,” he said, pulling away just a little. “Use two fingers on it, letting the center fall in the crease between them.”

I moaned.

“Feel good, goddess?”

“Yes.”

“How good?”

“Not as good as you fucking me.”

“Good answer. Hook your fingers. Put them in your cunt. Then drag them back out to your clit. Rub with the very tips.”

“Oh, Jonathan, please. Please fuck me.”

“Don’t you like this?” There was

something in his voice, some sarcasm. As though this wasn't foreplay, but him making an argument. I stopped and started to pull my hand out of my pants, but he grabbed my bruised elbow, making me flinch. "Don't stop. Make yourself come."

"I don't—"

"Do it."

I couldn't stop. I couldn't demand he explain what the fuck he thought he was doing because when he said *do it*, I wanted to. I wanted to please him, to submit, to *be his*. I was more than a submissive because submission implied a choice. I was his slave.

I rubbed my clit, gathering fluids, juice flooding between my fingers. I let

out a high-pitched *ah* then choked it off.

“Let’s hear it, Monica.”

“Oh, God,” I whispered.

He moved to my side, crouching so his breath was on my cheek. I turned to face him, eye to eye, my legs spread, my left hand on the tree, my right hand in my pants. He still didn’t touch me, just breathed with me as my lower lip dropped and my lids hooded.

“You like it.”

“I like you better.” My breaths got shorter and hitched. My cunt was hot under my fingers, twitching, engorged, soaking.

“I bet,” he said.

“Take me.”

“Come.”

“Yes.”

The tingle ran from my knees to my waist, and my ass bucked as if Jonathan was still behind me. I cried out loud enough for the neighbors to hear, driving my hips into the tree as if I was fucking it. My chest rose and fell against the white bark, my cheek feeling its rough winter texture as I looked at him, just a shape in the darkness.

“That was okay?” Jonathan asked.

“More, please.” I took my hand from my pants.

“You’re insatiable.” He kissed my wet fingers. “I’m glad you like it, because that’s your life if I go to jail.”

I'm not one of those nice guys who will tell you to date other men. I'm the guy who owns you whether I'm in jail or not."

"Tell me what you think she's going to say."

He leaned on the tree and put my index finger in his mouth, sucking it clean. "Is it so wrong to want to keep you away from the ugliest parts of my life?"

"Yes." The feel of his tongue as he sucked my fingers was arousing me again. I leaned my shoulder against the tree, bracing myself against the drop down the hill with my boot heel.

"It's wrong to want to protect you? To keep you above my shit? A

goddess?”

“Yes. It is wrong. It can't last. If you make me into some perfect thing that's separate from your life, we're going to disappoint each other. And that'll be it. We'll be over.”

“I don't think so.” He finished with my fingers and knotted our hands together.

“Yes, Jonathan, yes. We'll be over. I love you. I love your past, no matter what it was. I love your present, and I want to be your future. But lying will break us. One day you'll wake up and realize I don't really know you, and it'll be too late to bring me close. That'll be it, whether you leave me or not.

We'll be over."

"My secrets might be out for public consumption very soon. So let's have *now*, before you run away."

"I want to hear it from you."

"No."

"Then I have to go meet someone." I dropped my hands and grabbed a branch, hoisting myself up the hill.

He put his hands on my biceps and pulled me back. "Don't. Just give me time."

"No."

I said it, twisting a little to face him, and lost my balance. I fell back, my weight on him. He lost his footing, and we tumbled down the hill, all elbows

and feet, complete with *oofs* and screams and the sounds of cracking, rustling brush. My world blurred into a spinning, dark vortex before I landed in a heap at the top of the retaining wall. Jonathan fell onto the flagstones in the backyard, his back slamming against the low wall bordering the tangerine tree.

“Oh!” I shouted, scrambling up. “Jonathan!” I jumped the wall and landed by him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, though I was standing and he was prone.

“I’m fine. I’ve fallen down that hill a hundred times.” I pulled him up. He cringed.

“Are you sure?” He picked a twig

from my T-shirt, and I brushed his collar. He turned his head and grimaced.

“Could I be any more bruised than I am already?”

He smiled, then I smiled, and we laughed. He put his hands on my cheek, and we kissed through our laughter. He bent his neck and drew a long breath.

“I think you twisted your neck good,” I said. “You should have just let me go meet her.”

“Never.” He kissed me again, keeping his neck straight. I kissed him back, deeply, because I was about to disappoint him.

“Now,” I said. “And if not now, tomorrow.”

“I’ll take you to bed.”

“I thought I was too beat up to fuck?”

“I’ll make it work.”

“Every day between now and when you’re ready to talk to me? Your whole plan for dealing with Jessica can’t be to keep me in the dark? She’s going to get you declared incompetent. This is all right with you?”

He went to put his right arm around my shoulders and stopped himself, groaning.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine. It’s not that big a hill.”

“But you fell on a bunch of

pavestones.” I put my arm around his waist and helped him to the back door. “And you’re not that young any more, you know.”

“Oh, you are getting such a spanking for that.”

“Not if you can’t lift your arm.”

“I’ll spank you with my dick.”

He barely got through the sentence before he started laughing. I joined in because the visual was so close to a pornographic Monty Python skit that we couldn’t hold it in our heads without laughing. We were still cracking up when I sat him in a kitchen chair.

“Ow!” he complained between laughs. I kneeled in front of him and unbuttoned his shirt. “Not now, baby.

I'm too tired.”

I pushed the shirt as far over his shoulders as I could. “Can you get out of this?”

“Are you making a pass at me? Because I'm already taken by a brown-eyed goddess.”

“Can you just do it, please? My God, you are a pain in the ass.”

He leaned forward, and I helped get his shirt off. The left sleeve was the hardest on him. Even though he smiled through it, his arm was stiff and he moved gingerly. The T-shirt under the button down was easier. I pulled out the good right arm, stretched it over his head, then dropped the whole thing over

the stiff left arm. His bicep was swollen and red, and his shoulder blade had a red bump the size of an egg growing on it. He bent his arm.

“Not broken,” he said, grimacing.

“But you’re going to have some nice bruising from your neck to your elbow. Welcome to my world.”

“Mine don’t come with the memories.”

I kissed him. He put his right hand on my cheek, and I put my arms around him, still treating him tenderly. I opened my eyes while I kissed him because I wanted to see his eyes closed in surrender to me, and I had that blissful sight. Jonathan, enjoying my kiss, in that slight abdication, made my heart flutter. I

sighed. Then his eyes opened just a little, as if he wanted to see the same thing, and we smiled.

“Sit still. Let me get some ice.” I stepped to the freezer where Gabby and I had kept compresses for fingers and arms that ached after hours of practice.

“Why don’t you just take me to bed?” he said as I put compresses on his neck and arm.

“Not a bad idea. Get up.”

We walked to the bedroom, and I propped him up on pillows, happy that I’d changed the sheets. His arm was getting stiffer, and by the time I’d set up the compresses, he could barely move it at all.

“Guess who’s not driving tonight,” I said, holding out my hand. “Give me your keys so I can put your car in the driveway. There’s alternate side parking tomorrow.”

“I can afford a ticket.”

“But if the car blocking the sweeper in the morning is my guest’s, Roger across the street puts all the garbage in *my* front yard. He did it with Darren, like, a hundred times.”

He reached into his right pocket and pulled out his key. “You need to move to a better neighborhood.”

“I know what you’re thinking”—I swiped the key—“and forget it. I’m not a kept woman.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I pocketed the key and went to my bathroom. Stepping onto the toilet, I reached the top of the vanity where I kept bottles of pills hidden from Gabby: painkillers I’d been prescribed for an extracted tooth, muscle relaxants for painful menstruation, and Xanax a friend had given me for a short bout of insomnia. I took them to Jonathan, who was dicking with his phone with his good hand.

“I have painkillers.”

“Why? You in pain without me?”

“Let me get you some water.”

“Monica”—he looked me with dead seriousness—“no painkillers.”

I put the bottle of Oxycontin on the dresser. “How about some Tylenol and a muscle relaxant?”

“Deal.”

I took the bottles to the kitchen, and as I poured a glass of water, I considered what I had in front of me, what I wanted to do, and what was keeping me from doing it. As I poured the pills in my hand, I reconsidered then went back to the bedroom. “All right. This is the Tylenol. This is the muscle relaxant. Go.”

He popped them in his mouth and swallowed, then drank the water. “You’re a good nurse.”

I put my knee on the bed and

swung myself to a straddling position. “I’m not done nursing you.” I undid his pants.

“Oh, really? What nursing school is this?”

I pulled out his dick. It was half hard already, and when I kissed it, it stood at full attention. “I have no clever answer.” I licked the length of his shaft with the flat of my tongue.

“Hell is freezing over,” he groaned, putting his right hand on my head and running his fingers in my hair. I opened my mouth and let him put pressure on the back of my head, slowly pushing his cock into my mouth, past my tongue, and down my throat. He kept the pressure, and I breathed calmly through

my nose, my eyes locked on his. When he eased up, I drew my head back, sucking him on the way out. He sighed, and a look of pure, relaxed pleasure overcame his face. A line of saliva connected my mouth to his cock. I licked my lips.

“You never let me use my hands,” I said.

He blinked, as if thinking about all the times his dick was in my mouth, counting off instances and places. “Total oversight on my part.”

“You like control.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Let me have you,” I said. “Give yourself to me.”

“Submission’s not fun for me.”

Hands behind my back, I took him again, all the way down, tasting sharp sweat and a drop of salt as I sucked him on the way out. “Let me please you, sir. Let me give you my best.”

“When you put it that way...”

I placed one hand at the base of his cock, and with the other, I cupped his sack. I took him completely, trying to keep submission on my mind and in my attitude as I controlled what he felt. The pace was mine. The intensity was mine. When he put his hands on me, it was with affection, not control, and when he came, filling my throat and closing his eyes, I maintained that attitude of

gratitude and abdication, licking him clean.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“How is your arm?” It hung at his side, unused during the whole episode.

“Feels stiff but okay.” His eyelids drooped as he watched me. He stroked my hair and cheek, and I kissed his fingers.

I kneeled and pulled him gently from the waist. “If you scoot down, I’ll rearrange the compresses.”

He did. I put a pillow under his head, elevated the sore arm, put him under the blankets, and drew them up. I shut the light and curled up next to him. Seconds later, his breathing slowed, and I slipped away.

Chapter 21.

—*I went home*—

The content of Jessica's text didn't surprise me. The fact that she'd bothered to send it did. She was desperate for contact.

Jonathan's car was parked right out front. I'd never actually driven a Jaguar, but as soon as I turned the key, I understood the difference between it and my Civic. It was smooth everywhere. The seams didn't rattle. No crumbs were in the corners, as if one simply ate more neatly, or not at all, in such a car. It went from park to drive as if by the power of thought, and the dashboard lights didn't glare or ask me to read them. They

existed to be understood in a hueless grey and whispered information urgently. *Half full. Forty thousand RPM. Seventy-five miles per hour.*

What heaven, driving a black Jaguar on PCH at midnight.

I enjoyed the ride so much, I hadn't even thought to turn on the radio, and when a classical station came on, I woke up to the complications of being in Jonathan's car. She had an order of protection. If his car pulled up to Jessica's place, alarms would be raised. Possibly by Jessica, the police, Santon's team—wherever they may be. Whatever the case, once she saw the car, I couldn't pretend we had broken up and I was looking for vengeance. I was going in as

the loyal girlfriend, and my leverage would decrease. I passed her house. Lights out. Car in driveway. It was midnight on a Monday, after all. I spun around the corner, wound up all turned around because the streets weren't on a grid, came back to the beach side of the street, over shot the house by two blocks, and parked. I needed all my options, and that meant walking in as if I'd taken a cab.

The modernist house sat on an incline with twisting stairs to the top and desert flowers on the way up. I slipped up the concrete steps quickly and inconspicuously, hoping the crickets and ocean waves covered my footfall. The

door was huge, heavy, and red with a knob in the center. The front of the house had small plate windows since they faced the street. The back would be made of glass from floor to twelve-foot ceiling, since it faced the ocean.

I stood on my toes and peeked. Lights were on farther back in the house, and I saw the blue flicker of a TV. The bell was the light-up kind. I put my finger over it and held my breath.

Then I pressed it.

Ring and run! Ring and run!

When I was a kid in the EP, as we called it, we'd ring bells and run away, hiding behind parked cars or a hedge, just for the joy of watching as someone came to the door. No game was more

infantile, yet I was tempted to play it.

Ring and run! Ring and run!

She wasn't coming. I had enough time to run away and get back in the car. Take PCH to the 10 to the 110 and get off at Stadium Way. Take a leisurely drive through Solano Canyon in Jonathan's car. Pull the sleek machine into the drive. Crawl back into bed with the love of my life and make him breakfast in the morning like I oughta. Explain I was moving the car and had to take it for a spin. He'd love to hear that. Delight him. That was my job.

Ring and run! Ring and run!

A light flicked somewhere in the house, sending wide bands of dim light

across the concrete path. I had a meeting tomorrow with the president of Carnival Records, and my voice would be hoarse and I'd have bags under my eyes. I had to go home and rest. Go immediately. I had a career. I'd worked hard. Jonathan could take care of himself. He was a big boy. Sing. I wanted to sing.

The front light flicked on, and the big knob flicked and twisted. I stepped back. One step.

Run!

The door swung open as I stepped down. She was dressed in slacks and a button-down shirt. She looked as if she'd just walked out of a soap ad. How did Jonathan ever fuck her? Did she sweat? Did she groan? Did a tear of

post-orgasmic joy ever drop down her cheek?

“Hello, Monica,” she said.

“Finally.”

“Hello, Jessica.”

“Won’t you come in?” She stepped out of the way, and I walked into her house.

Chapter 22.

The ugliest lamp in the world illuminated the room in warm light. It was gold with a parchment shade and a neck shaped like seven tennis balls stacked on top of one another. Everything else was impeccable. Somehow, though, a mark of impermanence stained the décor. Nothing looked settled or important. The corners were visible. The surfaces were without tchotchke or photo. The art was original but marginal. I had been right about the back wall. The windows stretched corner to corner, exposing a lit up pool and a view that was pure blackness at night, but in the day would

be clear to the horizon, where sky met sea.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”
Jessica asked.

“More of a tea person.”

Jessica made a *mmm* sound, as if my choice of hot beverage spoke volumes about my worth as a human being. Of course, that was my imagination. Her face betrayed nothing. “I’ll have some made. Decaf? It’s late.”

She’ll have some made? Did the staff not get time off? Did they work in shifts? Well, if that was my new life, if those were the entitlements one was to expect, then I was going to be as considerate as possible.

“Caffeinated is fine. Doesn’t

bother me. And green, if you have it.”

“Would you like to sit outside?”

She indicated the back.

“Sure.”

She opened the sliding door to a patio and flipped a switch. Heating torches went up, lights went on. I nodded and walked out. I sat on a chair, listening to the ocean I knew was there but couldn't see. I had trouble imagining having access to such a patio every night and being at anything but complete peace. Or was that what she feared? That losing the money to maintain the patio, the house, the studio meant she couldn't be at peace? I imagined the level of anxiety I'd face if the things that

kept me sane were taken away. My voice. My ears. Even my piano, with its broken pedal, was a rock I held tight when I felt anxious. Jonathan removing that much of her income had thrown her off a cliff, made her panic. Cornered her. Poorly thought out for a man who controlled everything at all times.

Even with the torches, it was chilly. I realized then, too late, that I didn't have my scarf. The crew neck on my tee was relatively tight, but my bruises were visible with even the most minor inspection.

It was darker at the chair across from me. But Jessica was coming. She'd see me move to a darker corner.

I reminded myself to always

remember the rules about Jessica, especially rule number one. Fuck her. It wasn't about her. It was about protecting Jonathan from her little rat eyes.

I moved to the dark corner.

“So,” Jessica said as she closed the door, cradling a manila envelope.

I looked at her linen slacks and button-down white shirt again. Maybe she'd just gotten back from somewhere, or maybe she and Jonathan were partners in their sleep habits, hanging out until all hours and waking up after what most people would consider a nap. Maybe they used to stay up all night giggling and sharing stories, all dressed to the nines, not a hair out of place.

I had to shake myself out of my thoughts. “I’m sorry to come so late, but it seemed like everything was conspiring against us meeting.”

“‘Everything’ being Jonathan?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ask him?”

“No.” Her question had been so direct and her tone so kind, yet condescending that I started to understand why Jonathan didn’t want me near her.

An older woman in a black dress came out with a tea tray and left silently. Jessica poured tea into two white cups that were so plain, they must have cost a fortune.

“I understand why you don’t want to ask him. He can be intimidating.”

I didn’t answer. I still didn’t know if I was playing rabbit-in-the-woods or qualified-to-kink, so I just poured myself tea. “I’m sorry I was rude to you when I saw you last.”

She waved it away. “I understand. I came on too strong. I assumed you were naturally curious.”

I consciously, and with great effort, let the insult slide. I’d asked for it, considering I hadn’t asked him the details of blocking me from seeing her and I had aggressively avoided Jonathan-bashing at Frontage. “This is a very nice house. The view must be

incredible in the daytime.”

“It is. You can see all the way to the horizon. It’s cooler too, with the breeze coming in.”

“Have you lived here long?”

She smiled a little, and I wondered if she could see that I was feeling her out. “Erik and I moved here after I left Jonathan. It was far away from him. That was the best thing about it.”

“And Erik? Is he still here? It’s a big house to live in alone.”

“Moved on.” Turning the line of questioning over to her life was obviously not on her agenda because she changed the subject back to me. “So, why the change of heart? You wanted

nothing to do with anything I had to say.”

It was time to pick what and who I was going to be. “When he got arrested, I got... Well you used the word curious. I felt like there were things I needed to know, and you were trying to tell them to me, but I wouldn’t let you.”

“And you figured you’d get them out of me so you could go back and tell him?”

I held my breath. I’d failed somehow, because she jumped on my motivations so quickly. I must have looked like a deer in headlights and turned shades of pink, even in the dark corner. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” My voice crackled like a piece of

paper being thrown in the trash.

“You’re going to tell him everything I said. And he’ll rebut me. Like my wrist, which I’m sure he denied breaking during sex. And beating me in his backyard. What did he tell you about that? Did he tell you I told everyone he wanted to rape me and hurt me? But he didn’t, of course, says *he*? Do you have any other source of information?”

I didn’t, but I said nothing.

“My lawyer says you found surveillance devices in your house, and he’s saying it was me. Is that what he told you? That I did it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not the one with the sick fantasies. Why would I do that?”

How could I answer? How could I say, “So you could try to prove he was an abuser. To shame him. To get him declared incompetent.” I wouldn’t tip Jonathan’s hand. I gazed down at my palms in my lap and tried to think of some rebuttal that made sense, but I had nothing.

She took my silence as permission to continue, her words measured and careful. “Every piece of information you have comes from him. Let me tell you something. He has control fantasies. If cameras were in your house, you have no farther to look than the man next to you. If a woman says he broke her wrist because he was holding them behind her

back during sex, believe her.”

“You said you were joking.”

“I shouldn’t have told you when you were working. That was the joke. It wasn’t funny, but I don’t lie. Jonathan does. You know that, right? You know he lies.”

I took a deep breath. How could I admit that without betraying him? To sit there and say I believed everything he’d ever said would earn me nothing but her laughter. I felt cornered, hateful. Jonathan was right. I shouldn’t have come.

“His father ruined my family. Did he tell you that? He killed Daddy. Broke his heart with some sneaky business deal. I didn’t know when I met Jonathan.

I had been protected. Daddy never even told me he'd lost nearly everything until I introduced them, and by then, it was too late. I loved him, and I fought for him. Just like you're doing. His whole family ruins people." Jessica leaned forward and put her hand over mine. "I know he didn't tell you about Rachel either. What he did to her."

My eyes shot to hers. My breathing picked up. "What?"

"You have bruises on your neck," she said.

I impulsively touched the bend where shoulder and neck met, as if to hide them or make sure they were still there. "What did he do?"

“He killed her.”

He killed her. Had I known that, somewhere deep in my gut? Had I been avoiding it? Lying to myself, as I often did? Or were there more lies on top of those?

I felt trapped. Months ago, I'd been flying, my own buzz filling my ears, with a destination in mind but a path not mapped. I had a job and friends and hope. One night, I spilled a drink. I touched a man's hand, and I let him kiss me on the hood of his car. Some time after, I don't know when, I fell into a web of lies and deceit. The harder I struggled, the more trapped I became. But who was the spider? Was it

Jonathan? Or Jessica? And how could I get out of their fucking web?

I glanced around, feeling the wetness in my eyes. God, one blink and I'd be a mess. I sniffed and took a napkin from the tray. I saw the manila envelope she'd brought out sitting on the low table. On top of it, face down, sat her phone.

"I'm scared," I said. She squeezed my hand. "He is rough. He..." I trailed off.

"Go on."

"He calls me names, and..." I put my hands to my neck and looked into the distance.

"Does he choke you?"

"He calls me whore. Did he say

those things to you?”

“Well, no.”

I started to get up “Never mind.”

She took my hand and squeezed it, pushing me back down. “It was just different for me. For me it was bitch and slut. Humiliating women is part of his sickness.”

I looked away. I needed to keep the pain on my face. I touched my neck again and whispered, very low, “He hurts me.”

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said, “I can’t hear you?”

I looked back at her, finding the tears of a minute ago were still available. I blinked them out, and they

dropped like stars.

“Does he choke you, Monica?”

I nodded.

“He does? He chokes you?”

I shook my head. She looked confused. I cleared my throat and eyed my bag. “I think I should go.”

“He choked me,” she said. “I had bruises just like yours. I thought I was going to die. That’s the turn-on for these men. Watching your pain and fear.”

“These? Bruises like these?” I said, touching my neck.

“Yes.”

“I fell down a hill.”

“You don’t have to lie to protect him. I’ve been in your shoes.”

I squeezed her hand. Her French

manicure was perfect on all of her fingers but the right thumb, which was cracked. “Can I have a glass of water?”

“Sure.” She craned her neck to see in the house. “She’s gone to bed. God. Couldn’t wait another half an hour.” She slid the manila envelope from under her phone and handed it to me. “This is for you. There’s nothing in there Jonathan doesn’t know, and it’s everything he won’t tell you. I know everything, and that scares him.” She patted my head as if I was a terrier. “Do you want ice?”

“Yes, please.”

She squeezed my hand one last time and got up, closing the door behind

her.

The temptation to open the envelope was intense, but I had very little time. I hugged it to my chest, unopened, and snatched Jessica's phone. I slipped through the sliding glass doors and out the front. The phone was recording a voice memo. I shut it down as soon as I hit the street. If she tried to chase me, she'd be looking for my car. I still walked behind hedges and in the darkest parts of the street until I got to the Jag. I sped away as fast as the car and common sense allowed.

On the drive home, I considered that I'd done something really stupid. I didn't know which stupid thing I'd done. A string of things had seemed right at the

time and could still be right. The phone, which wasn't getting signal and would be untrackable until it was turned on again, frowned at me like a hostage. I could turn it on and quickly put it into airplane mode. I could pop the SIM card. I could hear everything if I really wanted to.

“Fuck off,” I said to the black rectangle on the passenger seat. “You're full of shit.”

I giggled at my double entendre that recognized the recording of Jonathan's spanking was inside. Then I laughed because my brain emptied of everything but the one thing that mattered. I trusted him. He hadn't earned

it and he certainly had pushed my limits, but deep in my heart, I didn't need to hear the recording. I believed him. I always had.

When I realized I was going ninety-five, I pulled over. I rubbed the tears from my eyes, got my breathing to a normal rate, and turned on the overhead light. Once I got back, I wouldn't be able to open the envelope because Jonathan would be there. Whatever was in there needed to be read furtively, in the dark of night, alone. It would be evil and ugly, written with the silk of a spider's web.

Chapter 23.

My feet dragged up the steps, boots clopping on the wood. I was fucking tired. I should never stay up late the night before any meeting, but especially not *that* meeting. I was going to crawl under the sheets with Jonathan, curl up next to his beautiful, warm body, and sleep.

Except he was sitting on the porch. He did not look happy.

His jacket was slung over the back of the porch swing. He wore his pants, fastened, his shirt, unbuttoned thrice, and his shoes. The shoes bothered me. He could walk away any second. He held out his hand. I dropped his car keys

in it.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you,” he said, “but don’t do that again.”

“Do what? Steal the car? Or drug you?”

“See my ex-wife.”

“That’s the one thing I won’t apologize for.”

I put the envelope and phone next to him then leaned on the porch railing. He didn’t even look at them but kept his eyes on mine and his foot braced on the table in front of him. We regarded each other in silence for a second.

“Have you put the starter back in my car?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll get over there later.”

“Lil will take you.”

“I’ll take the bus,” I said.

“No, you won’t.”

“Go to hell, Jonathan.”

“I should go to hell? I? Me? I should go to hell?”

“Yes, you. You have felony charges against you, and you spend all your time finding ways to keep me from helping you. What was your plan for dealing with her? You gonna just let her blackmail you because you have the money lying around?”

“No, Monica, I had a plan. But I spent all my time making sure you didn’t fuck it up.”

I sat back on the railing and

crossed my arms, locking my feet against the vertical rails so I didn't fall over. "You could have just told me."

"I don't tell people things like that. It's not my way."

I rocked back on my feet. The railing had held for a hundred years and would hold for a hundred more, but Jonathan didn't know that. He stiffened when it looked like I'd fall.

"Did I fuck it up?" I asked.

"No. You just fucked *me* up. I couldn't think. I knew all the things Jessica would say to you, and I thought she would drive you away. Whatever you needed to hear, and I thought the worst, she'd say it. Then this time, you'd be gone for good."

If touching him would have been appropriate, I would have stroked his cheek and kissed his mouth. I would have held his hands, warming them against the late November chill. I would have whispered my love in his ear in the cadence of his laughter. But we had too much of the last two days between us to make any of that meaningful.

“I am very sorry about the sleeping pills,” I said. “I didn’t think until after that you need your self-control, and I took it away. That was wrong and a breach of trust. I’m sorry.” When he didn’t answer, I continued. “I may steal your car again, though.”

“Take it.” He waved his hand as

though he was giving me the last bite of dessert. “Can you tell me what she said?”

“Apparently, you killed your first love. She made it out like cold-blooded murder.”

The anger drained from his face, replaced by the flatness of fear.

“Don’t look like that,” I said. “I love you.”

“But I did it.”

“I know.”

We regarded each other for what seemed like a long time.

“That envelope, right there, she gave it to me. It’s a draft of an article written for *eLA Rag*. I already have a piece of it that Gabby got her hands on,

don't ask me how. They suggest that you were driving the car Rachel was in when she drowned. You saved yourself and let her die. Jessica said you're aware that she knows all this."

"I am."

"Can I hear the whole story from your lips, please?"

"No, Monica. No. A thousand times, no."

"All I got from her was the goddamn envelope before I took her phone. So I can go back and—"

"This is *her* phone?" He pointed to the black rectangle on top of the envelope.

"Yes."

He picked it up. “You stole her phone.”

“I prefer the term *lifted*,” I said. “In any case, if she did ‘ask for it’ like you said, the raw audio might be on there.”

“*You stole her phone.*” He cradled in the space between his palms, as if he didn’t want too much of it touching his skin. “Did you listen?”

“No. That’s all you. Figure it out.”

“You don’t want to know how far I went with her?”

“You told me how far you went.”

“You are so strange, Monica.”

“I never made the decision to love you. But I decided to trust you. That was

a choice.”

He fingered the phone, flipping it over as if contemplating a greater meaning. “If the whole scene is on this phone, its best use may be to go public.”

“Whatever you want.”

“People will know.” He looked at me with meaning, as if trying to impart a few volumes of knowledge.

I knew exactly what he meant. They’d know how we were together. They’d talk, and they’d look at me in a way I didn’t want to be seen. “Fuck people and fuck what they know. Do what you have to.”

He held out his hand, and I took it, letting him pull me onto his lap. His arms wrapped around me and pulled my

legs to one side. I put my fingertips on his cheeks, letting the rough stubble scratch them. I traced his jaw, the angular line, the hardness of it, and his lips, source of so much pleasure, their softness on my fingers as I imagined them between my legs. I shuddered a little and rested my head on his chest, losing myself in his leathery scent. *God, please let me not be confusing love and beauty. Let this be as real as it feels, not some imaginary thing.*

“Why did you want to see her?” he whispered.

“To try to lift her phone. But if I told you that, you’d just say no. And if I failed, you would have thought I was

incompetent.”

He kissed my forehead, my cheeks. “You’re not leaving me?”

“No.”

“But you haven’t heard everything.”

“I don’t want a reporter’s research. I don’t want Jessica’s lies. I want it from your mouth. I chose to trust you, and I want you to choose to talk to me.”

Chapter 24.

JONATHAN

I held her silently for a long time, wondering if she could keep her promise to stay with me. I'd become so attached to that woman that her presence, somewhere in the world, comforted me. The connection, once I'd admitted it was there, was palpable, a rope of energy between us. Knowing what she was doing at any given moment was an almost religious experience, specific to her, and almost sexual in its purity. I knew she felt too, but she was a wild card. Her reactions never fit my expectations.

If she was going to leave me

because of things I'd done, she would have done it already. The effects of unburdening myself could last indefinitely and affect me the way they'd affected me with Jessica, in well-timed words and the sense that I was trapped by her knowledge. But it didn't matter any more. As of last night, I'd done enough to alienate Monica from me and more to bring her close. The tension between the two had to break.

So I formulated a way to express the narrative. It didn't run in a straight line. It started on a rainy December night, took a left when I was twenty-three, came around the bend a year later, switched gears the previous month, and only began the previous night, with a

death.

“Rachel died last night,” I said. She pulled away to look me in the eye. Even in the dark, I saw her confusion. “Well, I lied.”

I wanted to see her face, so I pulled her up to a straddling position. Her shoulders slouched. I brushed her hair from her shoulders. It was too dark to see her face clearly, but I knew I wouldn't like what I saw.

“I'm sorry. There's more. Do you want me to come clean?” I asked.

She put her hands on my shoulders. “Ok, go ahead.”

“Rachel required constant care. The accident left her in a vegetative

state. She wasn't even herself anymore, so little of her brain was functioning. She could have lived forever, except that when Jessica first met you at the Stock, the day with the cast on her arm, I panicked. I thought she'd tell you everything. I didn't know why, and mostly, I didn't know why I cared so much, but I knew I did. I needed time to think, so I moved her to another facility. She never fully recovered.”

“I'm sorry,” Monica said. “Are you sad about it?”

I felt myself smile, because that would be the question Monica would ask, not the thousand others. “Yes, but other things too. It's complicated. I'd assumed she was dead between the

accident and when I was about twenty-three. I'd done my share of grieving over it. But I found out she was alive, and Jessica and I found her and moved her."

"Okay, wait—"

"Hold on, Mon—"

"You found her? Who was keeping her?"

"I said hold on, goddess, please."

"Have mercy on me, Jonathan. I thought she was dead until a minute ago. You have no idea what's been going through my head."

"What?"

She put her forehead to my shoulder. "You killed her during sexual asphyxiation and covered it up with the

accident.”

“You have a very vivid imagination.”

“So, that’s not what happened?”

“You know that’s not my kink. I mean... Jesus, I should have explained this sooner.” I pulled her up again and took her face in my hands. She looked very tired. I had no idea how to make this any shorter, but I knew we had to finish it, if she could stay awake for it. “I have to stop and tell you about my father.”

“The passive drunk you told me about?”

“One of the many lies I tell about him.”

“The one who seduced Rachel

first.”

“Not a lie. That was the beginning of me learning the truth of who I am. He’s a sociopath. Clinical. He has no empathy. He only finds things interesting or not interesting, and hurting people is interesting. Young girls are interesting. Seeing my mother scream during childbirth? Same. My sister Carrie is a psychologist, and once she realized it, realized all the shit he’d done over the years, she moved to Italy. Swear to god. I see that look on your face. It’s not genetic.”

“I didn’t think you were a sociopath.”

“No, but I’m a sexual sadist.”

Saying those words was hard, even though I knew how true they were. As much as Debbie had tried to remove all of my negative connotations from them, I still felt a pang of self-loathing. Monica didn't seem perturbed, probably because it was just us on her porch. I knew that her shame was in how she was seen by strangers, not what we called each other when we were alone. "I thought for a long time that made me like him. That we were the same because I enjoy that look on a woman's face when I squeeze a little too hard, or that I like to make her uncomfortable. I thought it was a part of him inside me."

"And it's not?"

"It is. But even he's capable of

doing good things. He was the one who rescued Rachel from the car and put her into a facility.”

She leaned back as if stunned.

“Why?”

“She was about to blackmail him. She was going to expose that he had been with her when she was sixteen. You don’t blackmail J. Declan Drazen. He doesn’t appreciate it, let’s say.”

“Why didn’t he just let her die?”

“I don’t know. He has a thing about not shitting where you eat, so if he thought she was within his circle, he wouldn’t have hurt her. But he was secretive. We found out everything about the accident the hard way. When I went

to him about it, he literally laughed. I found out I was driving when some reporter came sniffing around, probably this guy.” I tapped the envelope. “I found out she was alive right after that. It was, let’s say, overwhelming.”

“You felt like a fly caught in a web.”

She’d captured that feeling exactly. What she didn’t capture was the feeling that if I got free of it, I’d be less human for letting go of the grief and guilt. It was mine. I owned it. If I unburdened myself, what would I become? An animal who stopped caring about the things I’d done? I couldn’t allow that. My shame was made me a moral person, even if it crippled me

emotionally.

She snapped up the envelope and pressed it to my chest. “You should read this.”

“I don’t need to.”

“It says you were soaked in salt water. Has it occurred to you that *you* rescued her?”

“I dove in, but I was too drunk to rescue anyone,” I said. “Probably nearly drowned myself.”

“They got your medical records. The skin on your hands was totally fucked up. You were banged to shit. Like you wrestled with the ocean pulling someone out of it.”

I remembered that. In my

sequestered hospital room, my mother had been at my side, smelling of whiskey, and she claimed ignorance about that and everything. Dad spoke to me after, describing Rachel's death by drowning, the body's absence, the car "she stole" floating into the Pacific with the tide. He'd get me another. Not to worry.

I'd been so shredded about Rachel, I'd paid no mind to my bruises or the skin missing from my hands. I figured that in my blacked-out stupor, I'd fallen. Repeatedly.

Maybe Monica was right. Maybe I hadn't been such a passive player. Or maybe it didn't matter anymore, because Monica's big brown eyes looked at me

for answers as if I had any. She looked at me as if she was on a starting block, waiting to win the race to forgiveness. I could tell her anything. I could tell her I'd strangled Rachel and buried the body, and she'd forgive me. God damn. I had done something truly evil in letting the woman love me.

“We ruined her family,” I said.
“Not that it was worth much.”

“You know, I think—”

I didn't let her finish. “Jessica's family, too. My father put hers in his grave. And when I married her, she was cut off. Then she became this *thing* that tries to squeeze me.”

“Jonathan, listen—”

“And Kevin. I mean douchebag, yes. I had my chance to hit him on the head with a cinderblock, but that somehow wasn’t permanent enough. I needed him wiped off the map of Los Angeles. So I had his warrants checked at the border. I needed his career with you to be over, so I made sure the last page of the commercial invoice was missing.”

The look of shock on her face, the feel of her limbs tightening made me want to reassure her at the same time as it strengthened my resolve. “I mean, look at you. You’re surprised. You can’t believe I’d do something like that, right? You knew it was true, but you can’t

believe it. Say it.”

“I believe it.” Her voice was soft and low, as if she was telling herself more than me.

“And you still love me? Because you believe in my innate *goodness*?”

She rolled off my lap and sat next to me, looking into the empty, diagonal street. “You hurt me too, when you did that. With the invoice. Any box could have been held up. I might not have been able to figure it out.”

“I didn’t care. Don’t you get it? I wanted to possess you, and I didn’t want Kevin in my way. And you love me, Monica? Do you still love me? Are you that naïve?”

“I still love you.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. Look what I’ve done to you already. You’re stealing things and drugging me. What are you turning into?”

“You’re turning into a dick.”

“I’m not turning into anything. What I am now, I’ve always been. I can’t believe you can hear this story and sit there as if it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” She pulled her knees up to her chin, a defensive posture if I ever saw one. “Did you want me to judge you?”

“Why wouldn’t you? Don’t martyr yourself to me.”

“Jesus Christ! What is *wrong* with you?”

“Your decency is endearing, but it’s already dying.” I stood up, my course of action set. I felt that tightness in my chest again but ignored it. “At least with Jessica, she knew what she was getting, and she could handle it. I can’t say the same for you.”

That hurt her, as it was meant to. The urge to gather her in my arms and say I was sorry was overwhelming. I had a moment where I could have done that, explained it all away, but that would be an act of a cowardice. I refused to allow another woman to be ruined because of me.

“Get out,” she said, feet on the swing, curled and tangled at the ankles.

“Just go.”

“Your car is fixed,” I said, scooping Jessica’s phone and envelope.

I walked off the porch without looking back. The slap of the car door seemed final. The roar of the engine and backing onto her sheer drop of a street seemed like continued punctuations in an ever long sentence. I rounded the corner, then another, up a hill, until I was at the top of hers again. If I went back around and she was still on the porch, I’d grovel. I’d pour my heart out to her. If I told her I was afraid of corrupting her, exposing her to my family, turning her into an unscrupulous monster, killing her, maybe she’d prove me wrong.

But she was gone. Part of me was

glad she was protected from truths that could be used to draw forgiveness and love from her. But the rest of me felt cracked down the middle.

I parked the car at the side of the road by the freeway entrance because the crack had opened into a void, and I was falling into it. I couldn't drive. I knew I'd done what I had to. I knew I'd been a man. Done it right. Taken responsibility. I vowed that my single life wasn't going to be what it had been before. I wasn't going to bed whoever caught my fancy. I would play it straight. No looking. No dating. No casual fucking.

Because who else did I want?

Who else fit so right? Who else could heal me? Who else could I damage as deeply, hurt as fully? Who needed more protection from me?

Right there, in my car, I said good-bye to a piece of myself. I gave up on it because doing so saved Monica from being the third in line for ruination. Saving her was a dark glow at the edge of the void, and that void... My God, that void was endless, lonely, black with loathing, and I clutched the wheel, white-knuckled, as I fell down it.

Chapter 25.

MONICA

That was bullshit.

That was a guy who felt responsible for his first love dying.

The choice was clear. I could get upset or not. I could disregard everything we'd been through already and write him off, or I could do him the favor he did me when I walked away and be ready for his return.

I opened my text messenger to let him know I was there for him when he came to his senses. I didn't hit send. The send button would deliver an immediate *ding* across the city, and he'd answer it (or not) and then we'd bounce texts (or

not) but nothing would be solved. I'd prolong whatever agony he was going through.

I was fully awake, and though my second wind would be short, I had enough in me to give him something with the ghost of a chance of truly comforting him. I wanted to sing him a song. Make him music, and one *ding* wouldn't cut it. He needed more *dings*. A chorus of them. A symphony. His phone needed to light up and make music.

I crawled out of bed and got my metronome. After placing it on the night table and setting it mid-tempo, I broke down a song into the beats of a send button without sending it.

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If each letter became the tap of a beat, time taken, and the send button punctuated each line, assuming the network functioned properly, his phone should ding to the rhythms of my hurt and my steadfast concern. Three/three/two/five/three. Sixteen

beats. Four measures. No downbeats or dynamics with a phone ding, but I could play with the timing and give every fourth a dotted quarter for *umph* if I needed it.

I set the metronome and practiced tapping into my phone. I used the enter key instead of the send button. An hour later, I felt like I'd nailed it, and my second wind was wearing down. Now or never. I cracked my knuckles and began.

Chapter 26.

JONATHAN

Two in the morning. Still raining. I could have called any Asia office and caught them in time for a good balling-out over whatever. God help them if they called me with some crap they could manage themselves.

I wanted her already. Her body under mine. Her voice saying my name. Her all-consuming hunger for life. The first months would be the hardest. I knew that from losing Jessica. How could I compare the blip that was Monica to the ten years I'd spent with my bitch of a wife?

Even if I hadn't believed it at the

time, Jessica had run her course. That was the difference. My time with Monica had been cut off at the knees.

I already wanted to know what she was doing. Instead, I went into the shower and tried to scald the thought of her from me. I undressed in the bathroom, leaving my clothes on the floor like a slob.

My phone dinged once, then again. It was in my jacket pocket, draped over the vanity. Fucking Asia. The whole continent should fall into the sea, and by the urgency of the dinging, it sounded as if it was. By the time I got there, it had gone off another ten times, and a rhythm was appearing. The texts were coming furiously. The thing must be broken or

stuck.

I finally got it out of my pocket.

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It went on. And on. It was Monica, singing me a song. I sat on the toilet, dripping, staring at my dinging, buzzing phone, and the seeming nonsense streaming across my screen. I could put it together if I concentrated. The effect was hypnotic.

The dinging stopped, then something came in a full sentence.

I _am_ here _under_ the _rains_ the _

A fist gripped my chest, tightening when I thought about what to do next. My neck and arms hurt as if the nerves were being squeezed. I broke out in a sweat.

Ridiculous. I tried to get control of myself, but it was hard to breathe. I leaned back again. I must have been coming down with something.

I did the only right thing and blocked her number.

Chapter 27.

MONICA

I didn't hear back.

How long had he waited for me? Two weeks or more? I felt as though that would kill me, but I'd do what I had to, even if it meant I didn't sleep the night before a huge meeting and I felt like hell. I checked my phone constantly. Nothing. I had to remind myself to breathe.

That was why I'd been celibate, to avoid staying up all night before meetings. Of course the meetings had come just as I was getting more drama than I could handle without a therapist.

I am music.

I am music.

I am music.

In a sense, I was a wreck. The night was emotionally devastating. I never heard from him after my song. I believed I'd have him back, eventually, if he didn't find someone else in the meantime, but I was upset. I'd never been dumped, and the powerlessness and vulnerability was physical. My veins felt sucked dry, and my rib cage seemed to have shrunk too small to contain my lungs.

A good cry might release some of my anxiety, and I'd been tempted to let it come, but I didn't want to risk being unable to stop. I put all of my emotions in a box and taped it shut with words.

I'm fine.

I'm fine.

I'm fine.

I couldn't play my viola. Much as I tried to keep the notes strong, the dynamics kept dragging toward sad. I had better luck with the piano, pounding the keys until I was sure the cops would come.

I got control of myself. I didn't know how long it would last, but if I could keep myself together through the meeting with Carnival, I'd be satisfied.

A text came through. I jumped, anxiety flowing out of me in a torrent and sucking back in when I realized it was Darren.

—*Are you guys decent?*—

A knock on the door was the response. I opened it to a perfect, clear fall morning, and Darren with his laptop.

He jerked his finger toward my driveway. “He left his car?”

“No, I—” I noticed a note on the

porch swing.

Monica:

Please know I'd arranged for this replacement before last night. Just take it, and we can call it even.

-Jonathan

I had an old black Civic with more dings than a bell choir rendition of "Deck the Halls," and what sat in my driveway was a pristine white Jaguar roadster. Convertible. Top down.

"Asshole," I said.

"Dr. Thorensen's parking in your

driveway again?”

I reached in my mailbox and found a navy blue Harry Winston box tied with a white ribbon.

“You are fucking kidding me,” Darren said, plopping into the porch swing.

I opened the box. Inside was a heart-shaped silver key ring and a white car key. “I don’t think I am.”

“That for the hickeys all over your neck?”

“I should buy *him* a car for these hickeys.” I pressed the button. The lights flashed, and a soft *pip* emanated from the car. Darren left his laptop on the swing and stood next to me, looking at the thing over the porch rail. “It’s gorgeous. Too

bad it's going back.”

“What? That car—”

“We broke up.”

“Again?”

I sighed. “He feels so right. When we're together, everything is perfect. But his past, it's ugly. It messes him up. I don't know how to get him out of it.”

“Probably not your job.”

“Yeah.” I sat next to him, and he put his arm around me. “I don't know what to do.”

Darren didn't say anything but pulled me closer. I felt exhaustion in my bones and a deep pit of sadness in my chest. I wanted to cry so badly, but I couldn't go to my meeting at Carnival

puffy eyed and dehydrated. If I accepted Darren's comfort, I didn't stand a chance of keeping my shit together. I stood up.

"Let's go on Mulholland," he said. "Or hit the 405 at, like, noon."

"I have a meeting in Beverly Hills in an hour and a half, and I think I should leave early in case I wreck on the way. I've never driven anything like this before."

"Can I sit in it for ten minutes? Come on, don't hold out on a guy."

Men, even cute, sensitive, bisexual ones, were still men, and cars and guns were somehow hardwired next to sex and food.

"Whoa, Monica!" Dr. Thorensen leaned over the fence, staring at my car.

“Take out a HELOC?” He raised an eyebrow at me, smirking. A lock of light brown hair fell in his eyes. He was in his late thirties and looked as though he was in his late twenties. Single. Straight. My friends melted whenever they saw him walk down his driveway.

“Dr. Nordicgod speaks,” Darren whispered, obviously not immune to the good doctor’s charms.

“It’s a loaner,” I called out.

“If you’re taking it for a spin, I’ll come along.”

“I can’t. I have somewhere to be, then I have to return it.”

He whistled. “Sweet ride. Come over and tell me how you liked it. I

might take one for a test drive soon.”

“Will do.”

He waved and went inside.

“Fucking Echo Park,” I grumbled, turning to Darren. “What brings you anyway? New car smell wafting around the corner?”

“My wi fi died, and I didn’t want to have to get a four-dollar coffee to use the signal at Make.”

“All yours.”

“I was going to go through Gabby’s room.” He looked at me as though he expected me to deny him access.

“No problem. And please raid my refrigerator. It’s stuffed.”

Chapter 28.

JONATHAN

“Are you taking Monica to the Collector’s Board thing?” Margie asked outside the conference room. Her office buzzed with activity, but no one approached her when she was about to go into a meeting.

“Not going.”

“Good. I don’t want to get dragged. Dee and Emm are going.” Dee and Emm was code for Dad and Mom. The worst thing wouldn’t have been taking Margie but Monica.

“All the better.” I couldn’t tell her I’d walked off Monica’s porch with no intention of seeing her again. My sister

liked her, and I didn't want to disappoint her or explain my failings.

“You sleep at all?” she asked.

“Same as always,” I lied. I'd slept about three hours less than usual.

“You need to rest before you open your mouth in front of her lawyers. I can't believe I have to tell you this again.” Her annoyance was a show. We needed to appear to be having an animated discussion when Jessica and her lawyers turned the corner. Margie and I had been in the same room since five in the morning when I drove to her house.

The car had smelled like Monica, and the mirrors were set to accommodate the angle of her beautiful

neck. She'd put the seat too far forward and left the wheel turned too far to the left. Still, I wished I could lend her the car another hundred times, just not to see Jessica.

My ex-wife turned the corner, lawyers flanking her. Ryan Myers, who had overseen the divorce, was in his fifties, in a brown suit that matched his fake tan. He'd been ready to tell the neighborhood I beat Jessica for kicks. The other guy was in his thirties and wore a grey pinstripe three-button job with a magenta tie. I didn't recognize him. Margie filled in the blanks without me needing to ask.

“Bennet Rinaldo. Litigator. Ass

pain.”

“Why do they have three people and we have two?”

“Because you’re the aggressor, Jonny. You have to walk in here undermanned or you look like a bully.”

“She asked for it.”

“Say that any louder and you’re on your own.”

Polite smiles were exchanged between the five of us. We were having an informal meeting, yet no handshakes were exchanged. Margie held out her hand to indicate they should go in first.

The conference room had windows on two sides and a large wooden table in the center. Coffee and fruit had been laid out on the sideboard.

Jessica found her place between her lawyers, and Margie and I sat opposite them.

Jessica was beautiful, and exactly what I'd needed when I was with her. She was sharp, and cold, and in control. I never thought I'd need anything else from a woman because I hadn't yet become a man. I'd changed, but she hadn't. She sat in the clear sunlight, hands folded in front of her. For the first time, she awakened not an ounce of longing, anger, or regret in me. I was glad she was out of my house, out of my bed, out of my daily concern. I wasn't even pissed at her anymore. I didn't think she could get me to hit her again

because, somewhere in the past weeks, I'd let her go more completely than I'd imagined possible. A relieved smile crawled across my face, and she saw it before I could wipe it away.

“Gentlemen and lady,” Margie said, sitting, “good morning. I understand an order of protection has been filed against my client and is waived temporarily because the plaintiff’s lawyers are present.”

Legal formality and boring. I tried to keep my eyes off my ex-wife, but she looked like a stranger, and that fascinated me. Had I kissed her lips while she slept? Had I stroked her body languidly while the breeze came through our open window? Had I confessed

everything to her in a heat of intimacy or brought her to orgasm with loving care and tenderness?

I couldn't attach any feeling to the events I knew had occurred. I was sure they happened. I'd held her hand when her father died and wiped her tears away with my lips. We'd argued about silly things, like everyone, and we'd argued about serious things. I'd panicked when she told everyone about my kink because I thought I'd lose her. I remembered the fear, and when she told me she was leaving, everything that I was afraid of actually happened. I begged, on my knees, I'd begged her to stay. I remembered all of it as if I watched it on

television or read about it in the paper, as if it was someone else's story.

There was a sharp pain in my calf that felt suspiciously like Margie's heel.

“Can you answer the question, Mr. Drazen?” said Rinaldo, the litigator, with a shitheel, superior tone that made me want to punch him.

I leaned forward. “You're going to need to rephrase that.” I had no idea what the question was, and I needed him to repeat it.

“On November the twenty-fourth, what were your intentions when you met your ex-wife, Jessica Carnes, at your house?”

“My intentions? My intention was to go home and get some work done

before a dinner meeting. She was already there.”

“You’re stating you did not expect her?”

“Yes.”

“Can you describe your frame of mind?”

“No.”

“Mr. Drazen—”

“I have to agree,” Margie said. “You haven’t even filed civil charges, and you want to go into discovery? Or was there something else?”

Myers cut in. “There are circumstances under which we can drop civil actions, which would give the state prosecutor little to go on. We can

advocate for thirty-days probation and a standing order of protection.”

“Describe the circumstances,” Margie said.

“All financial channels between Mr. Drazen and Ms. Carnes can be reopened, permanently.”

I looked at my gorgeous ex-wife, whose need for money must be deeply shameful to her. She didn't look at me but kept her back straight, her shoulders relaxed, and her eyes on her lawyer.

“No,” I said before Margie, and I felt her heel again.

That was apparently exactly what Rinaldo wanted to hear. He opened a folder with full-color photographs that made me want to avert my gaze. My ex-

wife's welts behind, three red slashes across it. I had no idea I'd hit her that hard. I had been pissed off, and it was difficult to feel how hard I was swinging through a haze of rage.

“You admit to giving her those?” Rinaldo seemed to be in charge of the uncomfortable questions.

“I do.”

“Why?”

“We agreed to it beforehand,” I said.

“Are you saying she asked for it?”

“Not in those words.”

“And in the month previous, you broke her wrist during sex.”

“She fell.”

“Yes, I understand that’s the story. You left her in the emergency room as well, so you wouldn’t be questioned,” Rinaldo said.

“I left her because I had a plane to catch and her boyfriend showed up.”

“Your current girlfriend was seen last night with bruises. Did she ‘ask for it’ as well?”

I glanced at Jessica. Her eyes were in her lap. “You must really want this money,” I said.

“Your comment has been noted, Mr. Drazen.”

“Monica and I fell down a hill last night. I’d laugh about it if I wasn’t so banged up myself.”

“Bruises at the base of her neck are not consistent with a fall.”

Margie clicked her pen to get everyone’s attention and spoke in a tone that stopped Rinaldo and Myers in their tracks. “Thank you, Doctor. Unless you can produce photographs of these alleged bruises, I couldn’t care less about them.”

Rinaldo listened, then smirked. “We can send a forensic photographer to her right now. The State of California doesn’t need her to accuse him of anything.”

“The State of California cannot compel a woman to use her body as evidence in a prosecution. Do you have

anything else?" Margie demanded. "Because I'm seeing precious little."

Myers nodded to Rinaldo, and the young litigator's shit-eating grin returned. "Ms. Carnes's phone turned itself on to record when you threw her against the table." He pressed a button on his phone.

It started with a scream when I pulled her hair. What a convenient starting point. I looked at Jessica again, and her eyes were glued to the phone. I felt her desire to look at me as her screams echoed through the room.

I demanded a safe word. She questioned its necessity, and I said,

“Question me again, and I’m fucking your ass so hard you won’t be able to sit.”

It sounded bad. Really bad. As if she didn’t know what a safe word was or why one was necessary, and I’d interrupted her with a threat.

“It hurts. You’re hitting me.”

Calculated. So calculated. Somewhere in my mind, I admired her. She would have made a truly impressive partner if she wasn’t such a cunt.

The clacking of my belt opening sounded filthy and violent, and my

telling her not to yell when I hit her couldn't have sounded more like abuse. Listening to the scene play out was as uncomfortable as it should have been. And it was quite possible a judge would hear it. The recording could fry me.

“Wait,” Margie interrupted. “Can you pause that a second?”

Rinaldo paused it, but the violence of the encounter lingered in the room.

“Where did that start again?” Margie asked.

“With a scream.” Rinaldo had a wonderful shit-eating grin on his face that would look great once it was wiped off.

“Funny,” Margie said. “I heard

this one this morning. It starts much earlier.” She pressed her own phone. My voice came through.

“Jess, how are you?”

A vanilla conversation progressed into the lead in the pipes of her studio, her hurt for money, our history.

“And you’re saying you want to try it my way?”

“I want to. We’d need to set some boundaries beforehand.”

“No, my way. Right now. Then you tell me if you can take it.”

“Stop,” said Jessica. “This is fake.”

“No,” I said. “It’s exactly what happened. I’d swear to it.”

“*Okay.*” Jessica’s voice, soft and audible.

“*That’s ‘okay, sir.’*”

“*Doesn’t that seem a little silly?*”

“*You want to do this or not?*”

“*Yes, sir.*”

“*Stand up.*”

“I don’t want to hear this,” Jessica whispered to Myers.

He whispered *shhh* and patted her

hand as my voice came through again.

“Stop trying to look saucy. This is a functional matter and not for your pleasure.”

The next part was hard to hear, but Margie turned it up.

“This is what it is, this is the kind of sex you’re agreeing to.”

I commanded her to put her hands behind her back and face forward, then I checked on her, asking if she was all right.

I watched her reaction across the

table. Her face flushed, and her jaw set. I hadn't seen her blush since the first time I'd kissed her. The red deepened for the next part, which Margie turned up.

“I’ll undo your jeans. I’ll pull them down to the middle of your thighs so it’s hard to walk. You’ll be uncomfortable, and that will please me. Then I’ll get behind you, and I’ll grab a handful of your hair at the back of your head and bend you over that table. I’ll take off my belt, loop it once, and slap it across those sweet white cheeks until you’re pink as a rose and your face is covered with tears. I’ll stop

when I can stick two fingers in your cunt and feel how sopping wet you are. Then I'll fuck you until you beg me to let you come, which I may or may not let you do. That going to work for you? Didn't think so."

"Do it."

I noticed for the first time how shrill and desperate her voice was. At the time, it had sounded like a controlled whisper. On the recording, it sounded like a child's whine.

"Jess, really."

"Do it! Start with the hair. Or the pants. Whatever."

“No.”

“Do it!”

“Stop, Jess.”

“Are you a fucking man? Or do you just beg and cry for what you can't have? Is that how you get off?”

Then the crash.

Margie paused it. “We’ve heard the rest.”

“Where did you get that garbage?” Rinaldo asked.

“You Tube,” Margie said. “It had seven hundred views this morning. But let me refresh. Huh. Got about forty-two hundred now. Funny what people find entertaining, isn’t it?”

“A woman asking for it,” I muttered. Margie shot me a look, but I was spared the heel.

“She stole my phone.” Jessica’s eyes bore into me.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The singer.”

“Go near her again, and I’ll kill you.”

Margie’s heel drew blood. I would have to buy her flats for our next meeting.

“Like you did Rachel,” Jessica said through her teeth. “Took sixteen years. But there’s no statute of limitation on murder, even manslaughter, Jon.”

Ryan Myers stood, closing his files. “We’re done here. Ms. Drazen, you and your client can consider our offer. Get back to me when you have an answer. The photographs still stand, as well as the possible pattern of abuse with his current girlfriend, which we’ll be sure to mention to the prosecutor.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Margie stood and shook his hand. Meeting over and, as usual, only the lawyers walked away unscathed.

Chapter 29.

MONICA

I wore bruise-hiding clothes for the meeting, but as I wrapped my scarf around my neck, I wondered if Jonathan would come back to me before or after they were gone. My eyes welled, but I choked it back. Self-control. A woman of grace. I had to be that. I could crash after the meeting.

The car was, in a word, the most fantastic thing ever. Fuck Jonathan. I got to the meeting feeling as though I was the architect of a major planetary takeover. I would return the car as soon as I was done there, but until then, it was like a space pod in a science

fiction movie. Up the elevator, I told myself the usual. *My name is Monica. I stand six feet tall in heels. I am descended from one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. I sing like an angel and growl like a lion. I am music. I am a goddess.* I choked on the last word because it was his, but I believed it. I didn't think I ever had before.

I expected to be awed by the size of the lobby or the glass-enclosed conference room, but I wasn't. The dark wood floors, the receptionists' desk that put their heads six inches above the person they were talking to, the marble staircase to the executive offices, all of it would have given me an anxiety attack

six months earlier. But on the day I actually had a meeting that would have sent my friends into fits of envy-laced congratulations, I felt not a bit of tension or worry. Everything was in its box. Every emotion, positive or negative, was put away.

I understood what Jonathan found so appealing about self-control. I was the master of my body, my feelings, my words. I was fully in the moment, keeping my shit together. I was unattached to the results of the meeting. I was only concerned with being *in* it.

I'd heard those sentiments before, but I only realized that I had internalized them as I waited to be brought to a

meeting where I was but a single, struggling singer in a room full of people who could make my dreams reality. I had what they needed. I had the music.

Carnival Records didn't have a cutting edge reputation. They weren't "street." They recorded gangsters and drug addicts, same as anyone, but internally, they were old school and buttoned-up. The office was all business. They weren't there to create or be part of an arts community. They took care of business. That was all. So though I'd worn a yellow dress with cream shoes, a cream scarf to cover Jonathan's marks, my hair in braids, and red lipstick bright enough to stop traffic, the employees kept the colors toned down,

the lipstick nude, and the arty affectation to a minimum.

I wasn't waiting long before the receptionist brought me up the stairs, her ass swaying like a pendulum in her Robert Rodriguez skirt, big cloppy shoes silent from practice. She led me into the conference room. "Would you like some coffee?"

Again, Los Angeles was spread before me from Wilshire to the haze of the horizon. "Tea would be great. Just plain."

She smiled and left. I didn't sit but looked out the window onto the city of Los Angeles and the miasma of smog over the east side. Windows looked out

into the hallway and all the blinds were up, so everyone in the office could see where Harry was and who he was talking to. He came into my sight, flanked by an entourage, mid-conversation. He smiled and waved through the window to me, stopping to finish talking to Eddie Milpas and an older woman who had a very important point to make, apparently. Two younger women flanked with notebooks and smart suits. A young man with three days of facial growth and a plaid shirt with slacks, an intern from the looks of him, opened the door when Eddie pointed to it. The gaggle of them strolled in.

“Ms. Faulkner,” Harry said.

We had handshakes and

introductions. Eddie and I exchanged a meaningful look that acknowledged we'd already met. I tried to put an innocuous expression on my face to tell him I wasn't going to wrestle with him over Bondage Girl in front of his boss. Everyone sat.

We had almost exactly the same small talk as every other meeting I'd attended. Traffic first. Los Angeles neighborhoods next. Some personal family stuff from Harry about his kid's Little League. I avoided a conversation about baseball that could have gone on for days.

“Well,” Harry said as if he was cutting in on his own conversation, “it

was something else to hear you perform last week. Wasn't what I expected to see when I came out there."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Jerry, the producer who first recorded me playing "Collared" with a theremin, blasted in wearing a navy jacket and a windowpane shirt with the top three buttons undone "Sorry, sorry." He winked at me.

Harry gave him a smile that could have been swapped for a glare with no change in the message, then turned back to me. "Everyone in this room has seen you play."

I hadn't expected that. I thought they might have all heard Jerry's recording, but apparently, they all

stopped by Frontage at some point. Of course, Harry had heard me play the B.C. Modern.

“We’re all very impressed,” he said. “Eddie and I have been discussing some marketing strategies, and he’s come up with some ideas that are out of the park.”

Customer service smile.

If it was Bondage Girl, we were going to have a very short meeting.

If it was me pretending I was some sort of expert in the art of submission, I was taking my little F-type Jaguar home, picking up Darren, and going up and down Mulholland until I needed to hit a gas station. Then I would

bring it right back to Griffith Park with an empty tank.

“Out of the park, huh?” I said. “I’m excited to hear it.”

“Were you considering doing more work like you did at the B.C. Mod show?”

Without Kevin?

Could I? I wasn’t visual. I had taste, I could put stuff together, but I didn’t have what Kevin had. “I’d like to, but it’s complicated. That was a one-off.”

He waved his hand. “It’s an attitude. The work will follow, if that’s what you want. We want to brand you something like a Laurie Anderson. An all-around package. A musician, yes, but

also an artist.”

“We want to introduce you around to some of L.A.’s art patrons,” Eddie broke in. He seemed on board with the new strategy. I hoped he’d thought of it, because if he was just along for the ride, it would be half-assed. “There’s an event Thursday night at L.A. Mod. The Collector’s Board gala. Very big thing.”

“It’s short notice,” I said. I had work, but I could switch a shift. Work wouldn’t stop me. Jonathan had been clear he wasn’t going, but maybe that had changed. I didn’t know how I felt about seeing him under those circumstances.

Harry picked up the thread. “It’s

very short notice, but this event is only once a year. Next year, it'll be too late. We want your face there, photographed with Carnival Records.” He indicated Eddie. “An artistic partnership.”

I don't know what expression I wore, but I wore it long enough for Eddie to break the silence.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Can I get back to you on Thursday night?”

“No problem,” Eddie said with the same tone he'd used the last time we met, as if *maybe* really meant *yes*. He held out his hand to one of the assistants, and she handed him a piece of paper. He passed it to me. “These are the terms we're offering.”

I looked at the paper, but the words and numbers swam before my eyes. I bit my lips between my teeth to keep from smiling.

Chapter 30.

MONICA

I couldn't drive. I kept hitting the gas pedal too hard and taking unbelievable risks because that fucking car moved like a Serengeti cat. I had a heart-lightening exuberance I hadn't felt since, well....ever.

I needed a lawyer. The problem was artists didn't hire entertainment lawyers. I couldn't call someone out of the phone book or get a recommendation from a friend and hire an entertainment lawyer for a ridiculous hourly rate. Entertainment lawyers took on clients they believed in and either charged seven-fifty per billable hour or took a

percentage of the contract's value. They didn't just look over a contract; they negotiated it, and negotiated hard. The big ones were picky. They weren't wasting their time on a negotiation where their client had no leverage.

I pulled over, parking by a meter on LaBrea. I called Jonathan but got a recorded message in a soothing female voice telling me the subscriber wasn't available. I'd never heard that one. I didn't go to voice mail. Just nothing. Fuck it. I played with my phone until the web told me the number I was looking for.

“Hi,” I said when I got a pick up. “This is Monica Faulkner. I'm looking for Margaret Drazen.”

“Hold please.”

I waited. I was sure I'd be sitting at the side of the road in my white convertible for a good long time. Her firm was huge, her name was on the door, and I wasn't even a client.

“This is Margaret,” Margie said.

I sat straighter, pausing because I didn't expect her to pick up. “Hi, uhm, this is Monica. Jonathan's...” I paused again because I didn't know how to describe myself.

“Yes. Hello. Nice to hear from you. How are you?”

“I'm fine. I really hate to do this. I feel like I'm imposing on you.”

“You don't need me to help you

move or anything, do you?”

“No. I need a lawyer.”

“Fancy that,” Margie said. “I’m a lawyer, and I got a staff of them running around here.”

“I know, but I need an entertainment lawyer. I don’t want you to think I’m trying to use Jonathan to get ahead. I’m just in a bit of...well, a great position, actually. And I need help with some contract negotiations. So I’m sorry, but—”

“My dear,” Margie said, her voice warm and comforting, “don’t you realize? You’ve turned my brother around. You may live to regret this, but you’re one of the family now.”

She seemed so happy, I couldn’t

tell her about the previous night.

Chapter 31.

JONATHAN

“That’s Steinbeck country,” I said, watching the waitresses work the floor.

“Yeah,” said the blonde in the blue dress. Her friends were ten feet away. “They made us read all that in school. I’m more of a Heinlein, Ellison girl myself. You?”

She was lovely. The perfect vision of womanhood in a simple, short blue dress and heels. Not slutty. Fair hair twisted up. Warm smile through pink lips. Fingertips at the wine glass she sipped from. She was smart, and we were both sober, which was also nice.

“Modernists, I guess. Pynchon,

that kinda thing. Ever read *Mason & Dixon*? It's hilarious."

"None of that stuff in the Salinas library," she smiled. "Sheriff Traulich would burn it himself."

I normally wouldn't talk to a woman at my own bar, and I'd promised myself I wouldn't sleep around. But that morning, I'd run over a silver heart Harry Winston keychain as I pulled out. Since it felt insignificant, like an out-of-place stone, I opened the gate and continued. I almost hit the white Jaguar parked across the driveway on the street.

The return of my gift had hurt, even though it shouldn't have. I should have expected it. Of course Monica wouldn't accept it after what happened.

She was still honorable. I'd managed to leave that intact. I looked in the glove compartment for the navel ring and didn't find it. I was sure it would turn up on my desk.

But it didn't, and that confused me. I'd gone up to the bar to verbally pistol-whip Freddie about hiring a sixteen-year-old to carry drinks, and to think about not thinking about Monica. The first got done, the second was interrupted by the blonde in the blue dress.

"...and they all play country music," she said.

I'd missed something, and I didn't care. I'd never actually needed to care

before, but that had changed. The woman in a blue dress was a nice person, by all accounts, but I had no interest in sleeping with her.

I couldn't hear my phone over the music, but I felt it buzz in my pocket. My first thought was the memory of Monica's song, but I'd blocked her. There would be no more songs. It was Eddie.

“Hang on a second,” I said. “Let me take this.” The woman in the blue dress nodded. She wasn’t boring or easy. She was fine, but she wasn’t a goddess.

—*Nope*—

I dialed his number and walked to the hall with my finger pressing my free ear closed. “What does Monica have to do with it?”

“Carnival is sending her with me. Why? You don’t trust me?”

“No, I don’t. You’re a lousy

driver.”

“She’s driving herself. See, I knew you’d flip out.”

“I’m not flipping out.”

“You are flipping out,” he said. I got into the elevator. “It’s business. I’m not touching her, okay? Harry would have my ass, and God only knows you’d bean me in my sleep or something.”

“I apologized.”

“Whatever. I knew I had to explicitly say something, and that’s what I’m doing. Don’t flip out.”

“Okay, Ed,” I said as I walked into the hotel lobby. Michelle, the rooms manager, tried to stop me with something I was sure I didn’t care about. I waved her off and headed for the exit. It was

pouring rain, and I had no umbrella.

I was flipping out.

Chapter 32.

MONICA

Darren waved from the Frontage bar. It was crowded. I did some meet and greet before I made my way to him and Adam.

“Thank you,” I said when he handed me the keys to my Honda. When Jonathan had said he’d replaced the starter, he obviously meant “with a new car” because the Honda had still been missing a piece.

“Came to three-twenty-five,” he said.

“I’ll have it for you tomorrow.”

“Damn right you will. Because you owe him.” He indicated Adam, who

put his arm around my waist.

“I’m taking it out in kisses.” He planted his mouth on my cheek, and I squealed. He held me harder and I laughed louder, playfully punching his shoulder and forgetting Jonathan for half a second. Adam was a good guy. I owed him and Darren for towing my Honda from the Stock parking lot to a repair shop, paying for the work, and driving it to me. Kisses and a few hundred bucks were the least I could do.

“It’s in the lot,” Darren said once Adam let me go before I got cooties.

“Where are you guys off to?”

“Loft party at the Family Four. You coming? Dizzy Roth wanted to talk about the B.C. Mod piece.”

That sounded like the best offer I would get. “I’ll meet you there.”

Chapter 33.

JONATHAN

I'd tried to let the world spin on its usual course for two days. I tried to see what would happen if I just worked, stared at the ceiling, and avoided Monica. I didn't ask Eddie if he was *really* going with her, and I didn't ask Margie about Dad's attendance. That lasted twenty-four hours. I found myself in the pouring rain at Frontage, watching at her through the window.

She was smiling. Darren was there, but he didn't concern me. The other guy kissed her cheek, and she laughed. I stepped out from the bus shelter, into the rain. He touched her

waist, and she permitted it.

I don't know what brought the clarity. It could have been the kiss. It could have been the touching. But the laughter put me over the edge. Seeing her with her friends, as free of me as I'd made her, without all the destruction I'd brought. Happy, while I could barely have a straight thought without her voice invading.

I had wanted to talk to her. That was it. Just tell her I didn't want her to go to the Collector's Board thing because my father would be there, and I simply didn't want her near him. I was soaking wet in the middle of Santa Monica Boulevard, wondering if I should hurl myself through the window

or the door, as if those were the only rational choices.

I was on my way to the door when they were on their way out. I moved fast. That was always my advantage, not strength but speed and agility. I had the guy against the wall, crushed against the umbrella he'd started to open, before he'd even seen me.

“What the—”

“Jonathan!” Her voice. It sounded very far away. I had the guy's eyes on mine. He looked confused, and I wanted to kill him for not knowing what had upset me.

Monica. Even with the rain in her hair and in her eyes while she was

snarling like a lion, I wanted her. What the fuck had I been thinking?

“God damn it. What is *wrong* with you?” She pushed me off the guy who had kissed her, then pushed me again. “You are fucked, you know that?”

I stepped back. She stood between him and me, hands out, ready to take me on. I couldn't get to him without knocking her over. “Move. Just move.”

“Are you serious?”

“You're mine. No one puts his hands on you. No one.”

The three of them stared at me for a second, then Monica jerked out her thumb. “This guy?”

“That guy.”

“Okay, besides the fact that you

walked out on me—”

“Enough!”

The voice that cut the rain was near as powerful as anything I'd heard. Had a car alarm gone off from the vibrations, I would not have been surprised. It was Darren. Little pipsqueak snapped me right out of it. I went from rage to shame before he was finished with the last syllable.

“I have *had it* with the two of you,” Darren shouted. “I am sick and tired of the whining from you”—he pointed at Monica—“and the psychotic behavior from you.” He pointed at me. “Stop acting like a dick and throwing money at her. Stop breaking up. Just

stop. The next time I hear you two broke up, I'm sending out wedding invitations.”

I was struck silent. A part of me smiled, but it wasn't my mouth.

Darren took the hand of the guy who had kissed Monica and pulled him away. Of course, the coupling had never been Monica and him but Darren and him. I opened my mouth to apologize, but Darren wasn't facing me. Rain soaked my shirt, dripping under my collar. I'd never felt so ridiculous. Losing my temper never had good results. Monica hugged them both and came back to me. Her skirt stuck to her legs and her shoes sloshed, but she took her time.

“Do you feel like an ass?” she

said.

“Yeah,” I said. “How did you get here?”

“Little black Honda.”

“Can I walk you?”

“Did you bring an umbrella? Because you broke mine.”

I took my leather jacket off and held it over her head.

“Chivalry will get you nowhere,” she said.

I sensed she meant it. A drop of water fell from her nose to her lower lip, and I had to swallow the desire to kiss it away. “I need to talk to you.”

“Really?” Sarcasm dripped from her.

She started walking, and I followed her. She kept too far away for my jacket, so I just rolled it over my arm. We walked down the block, getting ever more wet with each step.

Chapter 34.

MONICA

The neighborhood was residential, lined with single-family houses and the occasional apartment building. Wet, brown leaves covered every car, curb, and grassy patch. We said nothing the entire walk to my car. I was getting wet, but he was soaked. His hair was dark brown with water, and his eyelashes stuck together in points of four or five. He looked down, hands in his pockets. He must have been freezing.

I stopped by my car. “This is me. Thanks for walking me.”

“You could have kept the car I got you.” He put his hand on the wet bark of

the parkway tree.

“I know. I drove it to my meeting because this one wasn’t fixed yet. So, thanks for the loaner.”

“I don’t like us when we’re formal. All please and thank you.”

“What do you want then?” I crossed my arms.

He pursed his lips and looked at my feet, then back up to my face. “I want you to be real with me.”

“You want me to be real?”

“Yeah.”

“Real. You want real?”

“Real, goddess.”

“ Y o u *blocked* me, you motherfucker!” I pushed his shoulders, and he stepped back into the tree trunk.

“I wrote you that song, and you were so disgusted, you blocked me.” I pushed him again, but he had nowhere to go.

“I had to.”

“Oh, let’s hear about that.”

“If you kept sending me shit like that, I was going to come back to you.”

“As opposed to what? This?” I spread my arms to indicate the block, the rain, our bodies almost touching, the fight over who was allowed to kiss me.

“I knew if I saw you again, I’d want you.” He was pleading, leaning forward, hands out as if passing me a basketball pumped full of pain. “That fucking mouth. As soon as it opened, I knew I’d want to kiss you. And those

wet clothes sticking to you. And the hair plastered to your face. You're custom made for me to hurt. Do you understand?"

I understood all too well. "Hurt me."

"Monica, that's not what I mean."

"Ruin me."

"Stop."

I stepped forward. "Destroy me, Jonathan."

He cursed under his breath and pushed his lips to mine. His movements were fierce, his tongue invading my mouth, his arms circling me. He tasted of fennel toothpaste and whiskey, the same as the first time I'd kissed him. The memories went down the curve in my

back and settled between my legs. He pushed me into the car, pressing his erection into me, and I pushed back, letting his hardness find my cleft. I groaned into his mouth.

“God,” he said, “I have to have you.”

“Take me. Own me. Use me. Pick a verb. Just, please.”

“Fuck you. I’m going to fuck you. That’s my verb.”

He pushed his hips into me hard, and I bent my neck in response. My legs wrapped around him, grinding. Water dripped from his forehead onto mine as he kissed me. The rain had gone from a heavy mist to a driving torrent. He

straightened and pulled me off the car.

“Take me home,” I practically had to shout over the weather.

He pushed me against the car and kissed me in the rain one more time.

Chapter 35.

We fumbled up the steps with lips attached, past the porch swing where he'd tried and failed to break my heart, into the living room, where we dripped little pools of water like a reverse archipelago behind us. I took his hand and walked him into the laundry room.

The laundry room was a foul, filthy place, and I was immediately ashamed of it. When I cleaned the house, the laundry room was the last floor to get a mop-over and the last sink to get wiped clean. So nine times out of ten, I just didn't bother. And there I was, with a guy who had a team of people clean his corners with Q-tips, dripping onto

gross, 1980s-era linoleum. It was the first water that floor had seen in months.

“It’s a mess in here,” I said, turning away from the towels I had strung up to dry, weeks ago.

He put his arms behind me and unzipped my dress. I noticed his chattering jaw and the ice of his fingertips as they grazed my spine.

“What does that have to do with me fucking you?” He peeled off my dress. My bra cups were heavy, soaked, hanging off me, and he slipped the straps off my shoulders, easily releasing me. I was down to panties and shoes, and he was still freezing in wet clothes.

Pushing him against the dryer, I unbuttoned his shirt, kissing down the

center of his torso as I went. He was damp, and I warmed him with my mouth, licking his hard, tight, nipples. His arms came out of his sleeves like a molting caterpillar. I threw his shirt on top of my dress on the floor and worked on his pants while he kissed me.

“On your knees,” he said.

I got down, eye-level to his crotch, and opened his pants. The zipper didn't work well wet, but I got it down. I hooked my fingers in the waistband and took his briefs down with the pants, arcing the elastic over his erection. He stepped out of the legs, kicking off his shoes while he did, and held up a foot. I peeled off his sock, then did the same

with the other foot. He was naked. Perfect. I gazed up at him, his perfect, lean body with its cut lines and furrows making a triangle from his hips to the beauty between his legs.

I took his cock in my mouth, licking every surface as if to warm it. He put his hands in my hair and groaned.

“Let me feel you.”

He held my head still and pushed his cock all the way down my throat, balls-deep. I breathed through my nose, the aroma of his wet skin filling me. He held me still, and when I looked up at him, he was watching me. He slid out slowly. I put my tongue against him as he did.

“Have I mentioned you’re very

good at this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Stand up.”

When I did, he gathered up the clothes and put them in the dryer. He stared at the buttons and smiled.

“You have no idea how to use this, do you?” I asked.

“Not the knobs, no.”

I turned the machine on. Jonathan picked me up by the waist and put me on top of it. The dryer shook and rattled under me.

“Lean back,” he said, “and spread those knees for me.” He slid a finger under the crotch of my panties. I drew in a breath. His fingers moved from my

entrance to my clit. “You’re wet.” He slid his fingers in me. They were cold.

“God, yes.”

He pushed my knees farther apart with his free hand. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you.”

“You want me, what?”

I wanted his cock in me. I wanted to come. I wanted him to do whatever he wanted to make me scream and beg for him. I looked at him, his perfect skin mottled with goose bumps, his nipples hard with cold, hair still wet. For the first time, I noticed the blue tinge around his lips. “I want you to dry off. You look hypothermic.”

I snapped a towel off the line and

put it over his head, leaning forward to dry his hair. He let me, drawing me closer as I caressed his head more slowly and gently as he got drier. I hopped off the dryer and ran the towel all over him, chest to back to glorious butt to muscular legs and the tops of his perfect feet. Wrapping the towel around his shoulders, I kissed him.

“I feel better already,” he said.

“You need something warm to drink. I have tea.”

“You? Tea?”

“You can pick a flavor. Come on.”

He picked me up as if he was carrying me over a threshold, brought me

to the kitchen, naked but for my underpants, and deposited me on the counter. I leaned to the shelf and got my teapot, then leaned the other way and filled it. I gave it to him, and he put it on the stove.

“The tea’s on the shelf above,” I said. “I have some assortment thingie in the back.”

“Assortment thingie. Let me see.” He found the box and brought it back, but he didn’t open it. I put my legs around his hips, drawing him to me. He stroked my eyebrow with his thumb. “I’m sorry. I was cruel last night. I said terrible things.”

“Yes, you did.”

“And I blocked you. I knew it

would hurt you, and I did it anyway. What you sent made me question my actions. I wasn't ready to question them. I thought I'd done the right thing, protecting you from me. I'm still not convinced otherwise."

"Does that mean you're going to leave me again? Because Darren's going to shit if you do."

"Fuck Darren."

"Don't leave me to protect me, Jonathan. I'm a grown woman, and I'm perfectly capable of ruining my life without your help."

"Yes, Mistress." A smile stretched across his face as he chose a black tea and held out the box for me.

“Not kidding.” I snapped out a chamomile. “I mean it. I had to hold my shit together for a meeting the next day, and it was the hardest thing I ever did.”

“But you did it.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’m proud of you.” He put his hand on my cheek, and we kissed until the teapot whistled. He shrugged his towel tighter and poured the steaming water into two cups, dropping in the teabags.

“I called Margie,” I said, crossing my legs and waiting for my tea to cool. “She’s getting an entertainment lawyer from her firm to work with me. I’m sorry if that was wrong.”

“It’s fine. She likes you. You’re the eighth sister she never had.”

I cleared my throat. “And you know that thing? That collector’s party?”

He glanced up at me, head bent toward his tea. “The Collector’s Board at L.A. Mod. Of course.”

“Carnival is a donor, so they’re sending Eddie. They want me to go with him. It’s part of presenting me as an artist.” I saw him tense, changing the angle of the towel draped on his shoulders. “It’s business.”

“Absolutely not.”

I was silent as I stared at him over the rim of my cup.

“Monica?”

“Jonathan.”

“He wants to fuck you.”

“I don’t think you’re actually threatened by Eddie Milpas.”

He rubbed his eyes. “I’ll tell you what. You’ll go with me.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Oh, Jonathan, I’d so much rather go with you.”

“I want you to be warned it’s all Jessica’s crowd. They’re nasty. They’re bored and rich. If you’re with me, you’re a target for their boredom.”

“I don’t care.”

He put his face to mine. I smelled the tea on his breath. “They’ll whisper

about you.”

“Fuck them.”

“We found the whole audio on her phone, and we posted it online. It’s gone crazy. Everyone knows.”

I got closer, put my nose next to his, and whispered, “What part of ‘fuck them’ was unclear?”

“That’s my goddess.” He pressed his face to mine, his mouth open only enough to move them in time with me, giving me a kiss made purely of lips and skin. There was sex in the kiss, but only the wafting hint of his breathing. Then he slipped his tongue between my lips, and my spine tingled as if some unholy spirit used my vertebrae as piano keys.

I groaned. My mouth accepted his

darting tongue, the command of his lips. I arched when his hand slipped down to my breast, grazing the back of his hand against my hard nipple.

“Take me,” I whispered into his mouth.

“I’ll do as I like,” he said into mine, and I felt the force of his words in the pressure between my legs. The personality change that accompanied play was so stark that the first utterance in his stern, serious voice, made my cleft quiver like a plucked string. “Hands behind you on the counter. One on top of the other.”

I did it. He put his hand at the small of my back and pressed upward

until I was arched and facing the ceiling.

“You need to go back to Bordelle.” He pulled my knees apart roughly. “This cotton shit is unworthy.” Opening two drawers, he placed my feet on the edges so my legs stayed open. I heard the clink of silverware. “This thing,” he said before I heard the soft crunch of fabric being cut. He’d sheared my panties with a steak knife. “It offends me.”

“Yes, sir.”

He ran his hand over me. I couldn’t see what he was doing. I felt his dry skin awaken nerve endings, grazing over my breasts, belly, thighs. Even the slightest pressure sent shards of pain at the black-and-blue base of my rib cage

and the soft meat between my legs, a punctuation for the pleasure of his touch.

“You’re still bruised,” he said.

“That’ll take time to heal.”

“Don’t stop.”

“I’m going to be gentle where you’re hurt,” he said. “But everywhere else is mine.”

“Yes.”

“Now, you want your tea?”

“Yes, sir.” Though my body was awake with desire, my voice was husky with heat and exhaustion. My vocal cords hadn’t forgotten that it was close to midnight.

He pressed my mouth open with his thumb and forefinger, as if I was a

kitten taking medicine. The teabag hovered over my face, dripping hot liquid over my mouth. I felt hot fluid on my lip and the dry, waxy taste of chamomile tea on my tongue. It traveled down my chin and my throat. I swallowed it like an offering of communion.

“Thank you, sir.”

I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of dripping tea down my chest. He must have dipped the bag back into the cup because the heat renewed on my nipples. Lines of molten liquid dripped down around my ribs to my back. I gasped when he put the bag on my belly and dragged it down to the edge of my triangle. I quivered in anticipation. That

hot thing, on me. Soft and pliant, yet firm in its burning intensity. But he didn't. He leaned over, kissing and licking the tea from me. He sucked my nipple gently as his hand stayed on the teabag, which felt as though it was cooling too fast.

I groaned. I had never thought to put a hot teabag on my clit, but it was all I could think about. He had to do it. Had to. Before it got cold.

When he moved his mouth to the other nipple, cleaning it with his tongue and lips, he slid the bag down, pressing it against my clit with the heel of his hand while putting two fingers in me. I yelled. Hot. Not straight-from-the-pot hot, but hot enough. Ten times hotter on

my clit than anywhere else, and the fire added exponentially to my desire. Hot tea dripped down my cleft. I shuddered everywhere, spreading my legs wider, pushing into his fingers. His tongue was still at my nipple, and I was bruised, yes, but I wanted him to bite it. I wanted him to hurt me. I was addicted to it.

He pushed his hand against me, heel on hot teabag on clit, fingers in cunt, and he rubbed them in circles. My pussy drank it. The bag got drier as the tea was squeezed out of it, making it rougher, like crackling leaves in the fall. The little scratches from hot, sticklike herbs drove me to the edge.

“I want to come,” I cried.

“No.”

“I can’t.” I opened my eyes to find him looking down at me.

“You’re mine. No matter what happens. Your pleasure and pain. Your skin. Your lips. Your cunt.”

He pushed the bag and his fingers into me. “Jonathan. You own me. I am yours. God, who else? Fuck. Please. My king. Please let me—”

“Come.”

With a sharp movement, he brought me to orgasm in my kitchen again. I thrust against his hand, screaming, back twisting. He put his other hand behind my head so I didn’t bang it on the cabinet, and when I found myself winding around to the point

where I almost kicked out a drawer, he caught me, panting and naked.

“Thank you,” was all I could say.

“You’re welcome.”

“God, I love you.”

“And I, you,” he said softly. “You still want tea?”

“It’s cold,” I said into his ear. “I don’t like it cold.”

“You have it all over you. Let me get you in the shower.”

He took me to my bathroom and got me into the tub. I stood under the water, letting it run where the tea had.

Jonathan got in, exquisitely naked, taut, lean, skin over muscle over bone in perfect proportion. I didn’t know if he worked out. I didn’t know where he’d

find the time. He could just be the way he was with no effort whatsoever, and that was all right with me.

“You just dried off,” I said. “And I’m making you get wet again.” I put the bar of soap to his chest and rubbed, working over his shoulders slowly, and back to his nipples, to his tight stomach. His erection was huge, waiting, a sign of things to come. I stroked it with the soap. I didn’t want to rush. I wanted to take him in fully, in all his beauty, touch every surface, feel every bump and curve.

His eyes went over my body as I washed him. I cleaned his back by putting my arms around him, feeling his

dick press against me. He took me by my hair and pulled my head back. The water got in my face, and I smiled. He wet my hair as he kissed my neck. He squeezed too much shampoo into my hair and massaged my scalp. The suds were everywhere. I laughed when they went into my eyes, and he laughed too, pressing his thumbs to my eyes to stroke the suds away. I was covered in shampoo, and Jonathan used it to bathe me, sliding his hands where the tea had gone. He went gently where I was hurt, roughly where I wasn't, until he got to where the teabag had made me come, and I groaned.

“Ah, goddess....” He slid his hand under my ass, his fingertips slipping into

my folds. They were wet but not from the shower.

“Again, please.”

“Put your hands up to the showerhead.” I did, and his followed the line of my arms, cupping his hands over mine, sliding them to the pipe that held the shower head. “Hold that.”

My arms up as if tied, he pushed me against the tiles and put one of my legs around his waist. The head of his cock sat at my entrance, waiting. I pushed against him, and where his member touched me, my body responded in waves of pleasure. He kissed me, hands at my ass, spreading me apart with his fingers.

“Please,” I said. “I want you.”

“I’m yours.” He thrust into me. It felt like an electric shock through my body, pulsing as he thrust, every inch adding to the pressure. I was full, engorged, all surface area for him. “Look at me.”

I opened my eyes. His hair was soaked. Rivulets of water dripped down the angles of his cheeks and neck as his hips worked into me. He pulled my ass open and slipped in a finger. Just a finger. Exquisite. The pleasure with none of the pain. I clenched around him.

“Soon, when you’re healed, I’m taking this ass again,” he said.

“It’s yours.”

He pushed another finger in, and his eyelids dropped a little. I groaned, feeling stretched and possessed, as though every part of me was under his control and protection.

“Look at me when you come,” he said.

“I’m close.” My arms ached, but I didn’t move them, just held the pipe above me because he commanded it.

“Yes.” He went faster, pushing into me. He used the fingers in my asshole to draw our bodies together fast and hard as he slapped against me.

My clit filled, my cunt opened with sensation, my ass sucked him in. “Oh, God Jonathan. Jonathan.” I looked

in his eyes, holding his face still in my vision.

“Come with me.”

“Yes.”

I released. The effort of keeping my face to his while I came prolonged the orgasm that washed over me. My arms were frozen. I couldn't arch or close my eyes. I just exploded in a controlled way, toes curling, my hands gripping the pipe. My cries echoed against the tile walls. My vision blurred. His mouth opened, and he grunted a long slow vibration, slowing, pulsing in a different rhythm. His eyes and mine watched each other, locked in pleasure, above and below.

Chapter 36.

JONATHAN

The house was as dark, and the rain and cloud cover had darkened it further. We tucked each other into bed, and I curled against her. I shifted her T-shirt and kissed her shoulder, moving my lips across it. She tasted of warm milk and canned peaches.

“My Jonathan,” she groaned.

“I’m not making a pass at you.”

She turned to face me. “Like hell.”

“I think you’ll help me sleep.”

“You never sleep much.”

“Well, I’ve been sleeping less, and I don’t feel right. Not since the arrest. And since Rachel.” I cleared my

throat when I choked on her name. My neck and arms hurt as if the nerves were being squeezed. I broke out in a sweat. Ridiculous. I tried to get control of myself, but it was hard to breathe. I must have been coming down with something.

She turned around to face me. “You ever going to forgive yourself for that?”

“I’ll get around to it.”

“You’re going to give yourself ulcers.”

I didn’t answer. Talking about my irrational emotional issues wouldn’t get either one of us to sleep, and we both needed it. I stroked her eyebrows as I’d done before, getting her eyes to flutter closed. She sighed and let me touch her,

relaxing. Our legs got heavy together as she released the spring of tension binding them. She seemed on the edge of sleep, breathing regularly and softly. Her eyes stayed closed when I stroked her hair. Then she opened them.

“You’re wide awake,” she said.

“It’s all right.”

She sat up. “No, it’s not.”

I tried to sit up with her, but she pushed me down. I was stronger, of course, but I let her press my shoulders to the mattress.

“Stay here,” she said.

She rolled off the bed and padded away. I didn’t know where she was going or what she intended, but I hoped

it didn't involve Xanax or alcohol. I didn't want to fight about that or anything. She came back with a viola and bow slung over her shoulder like a batter coming off the on-deck circle. If I'd ever seen anything as sexy as Monica Faulkner in a stretched-out T-shirt and wielding a stringed instrument, I'd be at pains to remember it.

“You going to knock me unconscious with that thing?”

“One way or the other.” She crawled on the bed, leaving one foot on the floor and stretching her body so the instrument fit under her chin. She drew the bow across, making it hum, then turned a knob at the top of the neck. I slipped closer until my lips touched her

thigh. “Any requests?”

“Something bombastic. With percussion.”

She laughed and played a measure. I recognized it right away as Mendelssohn’s “Evening Song.” She was all right, my woman. What she was trying wouldn’t work, but the honest attempt wouldn’t go unappreciated. I stroked her knee with my thumb as she played and rocked her body with the slow rhythm of the song. The piece was short, and when it ended, she riffed on the melody, smoothing it further. Her hips rocked the mattress like waves on the ocean. I stroked her knee, then stopped, placing my hand on her leg.

I listened with my eyes closed, feeling her sway, hearing her music, as it got farther and farther away. The sounds of the ocean outside the window grew louder, and the water rose, coming over the sill and flowing onto her floor. She must not have noticed the flood or care about the fact that her house would probably float right down the hill, because she kept playing and rocking. I was too heavy, too weak, too contented, to stop her.

The rain got louder and harder, dropping into my eyes, blinding me. My stomach was in complete upheaval, and my head swam as the waves pulled me out to sea. I had a dead weight dragging

down my right arm. It was a person. A woman. Monica? I'd let her face go under while I fought the tide. I pulled her up, the effort twisting my stomach. Her mouth was full of water, and her eyes were glassed over.

The scene was mine. I'd been blacked out from half a bottle of whiskey, but things had happened, and my brain had stored them deep.

“Rachel, baby, come on!” But even saying the words took more energy than I had.

I looked upward, to safety, and saw only sheer cliffs between us and the street above. The beach had drowned under forty nights of rain, and we were about to as well. No one knew we were

there. Most of the population of Palos Verdes was away for Christmas.

So it was on me. All I had to do was keep our heads over the water and not drift too far out, a simple task that became more difficult as the minutes wore on. The car drifted away, the headlights getting dimmer as it drifted out to sea. I'd been thrown clear, saved by inertia and a body limber and pain free from conspicuous alcohol consumption. Rachel was sober and stuck, but somehow, I'd jumped in and pulled her from the car.

I looked up the cliff again, the rain dropping in my eyes. It was a black edge, cutting the starry sky in half.

Hopeless. Going down had been as easy as a running jump. Getting back up would be impossible. I tried to keep our heads above water, and failed, and tried again, and failed again.

A light.

Two lights.

A car parked right at the edge of the cliff. I tried to cry out, but I had nothing left. The noise of the ocean and the rain would have drowned out even the most powerful scream. All I had was my body and my last bits of strength. I swam toward the lights, pushing against the current, and saw that the driver had found a way to crawl down.

The driver was my father.

He wore the khaki trench coat I'd

looked for at Sheila's house. I'd wanted his keys so I could chase Rachel. I'd seen him out the window, going after her, and run out. That's how he knew we were there. Thank God for him. I'd never been grateful for my father before. I looked at Rachel. She'd become a dead weight in my arms, but I pulled her up. A wave caught us. A lucky break. I smacked against the rocks, managing to put myself between them and Rachel. My father got thigh deep in the water, grabbed my collar, and pulled me onto the ledge. I climbed with him, pulling Rachel. Dad grabbed her and helped us up. I collapsed at the top.

“This is going to cost me, son.”

My father's voice. "It's going to *cost*."

The world swam as if I was riding the teacups at Disney. I opened my eyes. In front of me, so close I had no context but a few blades of grass, the dark, rainy night, and my own nausea, was Rachel's face. She too had her cheek to the grass. Her eyes glazed over. Her mouth hung open. Her hair stuck to her face. She blinked, and a tear fell over the bridge of her nose.

She faded, like a movie going to black, and the sound of the rain in Echo Park replaced the sixteen-year-old remembrance. Monica breathed in my ear in the rhythms of sleep. Outside, I heard traffic, a bus on Echo Park Avenue, and the children playing in the

Montessori school yard. I opened my eyes, as if waking not from a dream but a resurrected memory.

It was morning, and finally, Rachel was free.

Chapter 37.

MONICA

I wore one of the dresses he'd bought me in Vancouver, sleeveless black one with a skirt that fell half an inch from the floor. The neckline so low it required a special bra that had been hanging with it. He requested I wear it, and it was magnificent.

I covered the yellowing bruises with a little makeup, draping hair, and whatever accessories I could gather. I wouldn't stand up to a forensics team, but at night, in a dark party, maybe I wouldn't have to crack a joke or tell a lie.

I'd wanted to take my own car,

but Jonathan insisted on letting Lil drive, so I waited on my porch for the Bentley. It was exactly on time. Lil let Jonathan out the back. He wore a navy suit and a tie of darkest pink. His shirt was white and pressed, and he was perfect. I started down the porch steps, and he held up his hand.

“Come on, Monica. Give a guy a chance to get you at the door.”

I stopped and waited. He opened the chain-link fence that seemed cheap and worn next to his cleanly pressed self. He walked up the short, cracked concrete that led to my broken wooden steps.

“Are you ready?” he asked, taking my hand.

“It’s just a party.”

“No, it’s going to be ugly.”

I kissed him once on the lips.

“I’ve been to high school.”

“The stakes are higher.”

“I’m not staying home. I got all dressed up.”

“Ah, speaking of…” He removed a long, thin box from his pocket. I recognized the Harry Winston dark blue.

“Jesus, Jonathan, you’re going overboard.”

“Yes. I am. I don’t have a viola.” I took the box. Cursing him out while I was smiling would be hard. I undid the ribbon. He took it and rolled it around his fingers. When I looked at him

quizzically, he said, “Might need this later.”

“If the ribbon is the real gift, you could save a ton of money by just getting me empty boxes.”

I lifted the top. Inside the box, a flat platinum chain curled around itself. I pulled it out. It wasn't a loop connected at the end but a long strand. It had to be five feet long, with jewel-encrusted drops the size of blackberries. One sparkled with sapphires, the other, emeralds.

“A lariat,” I said. “My God, it's beautiful. Can you put it on me?”

He looped the strand around my neck once, draping it so the jeweled drops fell just below my breasts. “Green

emeralds for sea. Blue sapphires for sky.”

“Thank you.” I kissed him. “It’s perfect.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“You’re going to make it tough for me at Christmas.”

“We’ll figure out some kind of trade.”

“And don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing.” I pulled the strand on one side, looped it around my neck a second time, and pulled tight. The smooth, flat links clicked against one another, easily tightening around my throat. “Makes a lovely collar.”

He laughed. Taking the blue drop,

he unlooped it and rearranged the necklace until it was loose. “Let’s not rush.” He took my hand, and we went to the car.

Chapter 38.

MONICA

He got a call on the way. He mumbled a few syllables and relaxed visibly. When he hung up, he squeezed my hand.

“What?” I asked.

“My mother isn’t *feeling well*,” he said, the last two words emphasized as if it was some sort of code. “We may actually have a good time if I keep you away from the harpies.”

“I can handle harpies and your family.”

“I’m not keeping any secrets about my parents that you don’t already know. But I’d like you to be unsullied as long

as possible.”

“I won’t think less of you because of them.”

“Give me some time.”

He didn’t try to fuck me on the way, though our lips met so often that I had to reapply lipstick when we arrived. We stood in the parking lot as Lil drove away. Other sleek cars discharged people in expensive shoes and suits. The lights glared as I used the valet window as a mirror, lipstick hovering. Jonathan snapped the tube from my hand before it touched my face and kissed me again.

““Soul meets soul on lovers’ lips.”” He kissed me, then put his mouth to my cheek, and back to my ear. “Except when wax and pigment come

between them.”

“Barrett Browning?”

“Percy Shelley.”

“And the second part?”

He turned my lipstick tube until the brand was visible. “Lancome, apparently.” He fondled the emerald end of my lariat as if it was part of my body. “I can’t wait for this circus to be over.” He shifted closer and whispered, “I’m taking you home, and I’m going to tie your wrists to the banister. I’m going to blindfold you, then I’m going to undress you slowly. I’ll put my lips all over you until you beg me to take you, which I may or may not do.”

“Jonathan,” I whispered, his name

a white flag of surrender.

“Did you just shudder, or is it cold in this parking lot?”

“Was there anyone before you?”

“You might have thought so at the time.”

“I feel like no one’s ever loved me before.”

“I’m sure they did their best, but you always belonged to me.”

The parking lot’s lights were fluorescent and cold, but his gaze was more than warm—it was hot and fixed. I did indeed feel as though I’d never been loved before. At least not correctly. Not with purpose.

He broke our connection to glance over my shoulder, then back to my face.

“Vipers descending.”

I looked back. Jessica, wearing purple and cream, walked with a crowd, her hand clutching the arm of a man with an athletic build. I nodded at her. She did not nod back. She looked away to make conversation with a ruddy-cheeked man rather than engage me at all. A face I knew stood out from the crowd.

“Geraldine,” I said. “Wow. Hi.”

Trompe l’oeil street artist Geraldine Stark looked at me, then Jonathan, and smiled. She’d let her curly brown hair go wild and wove sparkled strands through it. Her dress was a macramé shift of a thousand colors over a black satin slip. She gave me a Los

Angeles hug, but I felt her eyes on Jonathan, who kept his hand on my back.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Did you hear about Kevin?”

“No, I—”

To my side, Jonathan greeted Mr. Athletic. They shared words I couldn't concentrate on. As the crowd moved toward the elevators, I heard Jessica laugh behind me. Her voice was caught in the lilt of small talk and joyful greetings.

“He's stuck in Boise,” Geraldine hissed. “Three years.”

“What? Why?”

“His parole is real strict. He gets actual jail time. They're *pissed*. So...” She glanced at Jonathan, then back at me

as we stepped into the elevator. She thought I didn't know she'd been with him. She thought she would surprise me for dramatic effect. She thought wrong. Looking meaningfully at me, then at Jonathan, who spoke to the blond guy, she muttered, "Have you heard about your date? It's all over town."

"The thing about Kevin is terrible. Honestly." The news shook me. I didn't care if she'd fucked Jonathan a couple of nights back when I didn't know he existed. I didn't care if she wanted to rub my face in it for fun. Jesus Christ, I knew the guy wasn't a virgin. A hundred women in the city could commiserate on my lover's prowess if I were the

commiserating type. Which I wasn't. I was the type who got upset when her ex-boyfriend went to jail. "It's awful."

Geraldine looked away. I hoped she was ashamed.

"We incorporated light into the design," Jessica said to someone I couldn't see. "The right temperature of light was the hardest to achieve. We wound up finding old tungsten bulbs in a warehouse in Torrance."

The doors opened onto the patio at L.A. Mod, which had been decked out in hanging lanterns and silver streamers. The effect was beautiful, incandescent, as if a few dozen artists had collaborated on the décor.

"Five minutes," Jonathan said in

my ear as the crowd filed out. “Stay in my sight.”

Geraldine’s date pulled her with the tide out toward the patio, but not before she grabbed my hand and said “*Do it...*” She laughed as she disappeared into the throng.

Photographers and reporters waited, and the flashing lights made me wince. I waved to her quickly to say good-bye, and she waved back. I wished she’d stayed, even to talk about sex or prison time, because I was alone. Jonathan was ten feet away by a serving stand, talking in serious tones to the light-haired guy. Jessica was surrounded by a gaggle of people, all laughing as if

they didn't have a care in the world. Jonathan and the big guy looked as though they were going to come to blows. He glanced at me and held out his hand in a slight gesture that meant "stay away."

The elevator doors slid open and another group got out. I heard the phrase again, though Geraldine was far from me.

Do it...

It sounded recorded. I looked behind me. Two girls stared at a phone, the light glowing on their faces.

Do it...

One pocketed the phone when they stepped onto the patio, giggling.

Jonathan's conversation wasn't

going well. I couldn't stand there. I just couldn't. I walked over.

“Hi,” I said. Jonathan slipped his hand over my shoulder. “I'm Monica.” I held out my hand. The blond guy didn't take it.

“You stole something from my house.”

Jonathan pulled me closer. I felt his body inching between the other man and me. “This conversation is over.”

“It hasn't started. I've got a lawyer.”

He seemed aggressive and off-kilter. As big as he was, he was so non-threatening, I couldn't be scared. He was handsome and looked fine in his tuxedo,

but he wasn't wearing it...it was wearing *him*. He had no presence, no voice, no significance. Then I realized who he was. Erik. The man Jessica left Jonathan for.

That woman needed a cunt transplant.

“All these phones look alike,” I said. “It was dark. I thought it was mine.” I pursed my lips, trying to keep my mouth in some kind of line that didn't resemble a smile. But I failed on some level. He didn't believe me. A four-year-old wouldn't have believed me.

“You know what he did?” Erik said. “To her?” He jerked his thumb in the general direction of where Jessica may have been standing.

“I hear she was asking for it.” The elevator dinged behind me.

“You’re both sick,” Erik said.

“O’Drassen!” A voice came from behind us, at the elevator. Jonathan turned me around and led me toward Eddie. He wore a white jacket and black tie, his hair combed into a pompadour.

“Ed,” Jonathan said, “take care of her.” He pushed me toward the guy he’d objected to taking me to the event in the first place.

“No problem,” Eddie replied. “And I’m doing great, by the way. Thanks for asking.”

“I mean it. Not out of your sight.”

Some guy thing happened between

them, because Eddie stuck out his hand and Jonathan shook it, taking him by the bicep. Then he kissed me. “Be good.” He turned back to Erik, who had been joined by a man with darker hair and ruddy cheeks.

“I feel like I’m stranded in Manland,” I said to Eddie.

“You are.”

As we went into the throng of photographers, I glanced back to find Jonathan and Erik talking heatedly as if I hadn’t even interrupted.

“You ready to be Carnival’s newest face?” asked Eddie.

“Unless you try to put me in a leather mask.”

“Yeah, well that’s off the table.

Coulda made a lot of money. This new idea's a clunker."

"You could drop me."

"And let some douchebag from Vintage pick you up? Hell, no."

The flashing lights were blinding. Between the women in sequins and the men wearing black, it was a high-contrast world. I heard laughter and chirpy voices. I heard clearly one phrase had caught on. It was whispered and shouted and giggled over.

Do it...

I had my customer service smile ready. My hand was on Eddie's arm, but I kept my body far from his. I didn't want to embarrass Jonathan, and I didn't

want to appear weak and needy. Those pictures would end up in music and art trades. If I acted like a piece of arm candy for a record executive, I'd have to explain, then prove that I wasn't.

The cocktail hour was a whirlwind of drinks, cameras, and questions. Who was I? Why was I there? I talked about the B.C. Mod show with Unnamed Trio, which brought Kevin to mind. I tried not to think about him. I talked about my gigs at Frontage, the possibility of a contract, and my education. There were no softball questions about music. The reporters were from art trades, so there was no talk of art itself, only the business of art. I brushed shoulders with Jessica once.

We glanced at each other and moved on. It was business.

Eddie and I milled with the guests outside a huge pair of wooden doors. A woman in a red jacket had come by with a man behind her. He carried a silver tray filled with metal lapel pins. Gold, silver, and rhinestone. She asked our names, then selected a gold pin from her assistant's tray and gave it to Eddie. She gave me a rhinestone. I had no idea what it meant. Glancing around, I could easily tell the artists from the collectors. They were different from their postures to the make of the clothing. The colors, accessories, shoes, all spoke to social class. I caught Geraldine Stark's eye.

She wore a silver lapel pin. My eyes found Jessica. She looked nervous and unhappy, tucking her hair behind her ear. She also wore a silver pin. Artists must get silver, except I had rhinestone.

A couple behind me said, “*Do it...*” together before giggling.

“We’re sitting down in five,” Eddie muttered. “I’ll pass you back to your date.”

“Thanks. That was fun.”

“Get used to it.”

“I thought we were all going to go broke because I didn’t want to carry a riding crop.”

“Not quite *broke*.” He smirked at me and patted my arm.

The doors opened, and the crowd

flowed into a huge room overlooking Los Angeles on three sides. Tables had been set in rows with white tablecloths and shining silverware. A longer table sat in front, by the window, Jonathan wasn't there. Chairs scraped. Voices bounced off the high ceiling. I could sit and start a conversation, but he'd been gone too long. Way too long.

Eddie and I held an animated conversation about the future of streaming with two men he introduced as website developers. I saw Erik talking to Jessica. I scanned the room. No sign of Jonathan. Between his hair and his height, he was a hard guy to miss. Seats were being taken, and the wait staff

came out with water pitchers and wine. I slipped away from Eddie as he was making a point about subscription rates on internet radio, and I went out the big wooden doors back to the patio.

The staff had already started breaking down, and the area looked inelegant at best. The floodlights had been removed from the photographers' area already, making it appear flat and littered. Jonathan was nowhere to be found. The cameras had missed him entirely. I wondered if that was his plan from the beginning.

A man walked toward me with intention. He was tall, maybe six-four, and wore a black cashmere coat and scarf. He was in his sixties but well-

worn, taut in the neck and jaw. He had sparkling turquoise eyes and white hair. “Have they gone in?”

“Yeah. The ladies in the red jackets give you your seat. You get one of these pins.” I indicated my rhinestone, and he looked at it appreciatively.

“God forbid we should walk around without a status symbol,” he said.

“Yeah. It’s like a nametag but not as personal.”

“Like you’re only as good as the money you spend.”

His voice sounded eerily like Jonathan’s but wasn’t. I must have looked worried because he put his hand on my shoulder. It wasn’t an

uncomfortable touch, just comforting.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

He took his hand off me and straightened, pulling a silk handkerchief from his pocket. “You should wipe your eyes, then.”

“I wasn’t crying,” I said, more in surprise than denial. I put my fingers to my face, but he put out his hand before I touched it. He pressed the handkerchief under my eyes. I let him. I didn’t know why. He seemed nice enough.

“You’re smudged, nonetheless. It wouldn’t be right to have such a lovely woman look like a raccoon.”

I put my hands on his and pressed the hankie down. He brought his hand

away.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You look familiar,” he said.

“Did you come to this circus last year?”

“No.”

“My God. You should have seen the place. It was a Damien Hirst homage with decapitated heads for centerpieces.”

“Sounds awful.”

“The forks had these hands already attached to them. With veins and nerves. I almost didn’t come tonight. I was afraid they were going to try to top themselves.” He wrinkled his nose, and I smiled. “Well, I’m glad you weren’t here. Maybe I know you from

somewhere else.”

I looked up at him as if for the first time, trying to see if I could place his features. There was something about the shape of his eyes, the angle of his jaw, the way he tilted his head when he spoke.

Jessica burst out the big doors, on the phone. I angled myself behind the man in the cashmere coat. “Deny it,” she said into the phone in clipped syllables. “It’s not my voice. Just say no comment.”

She stopped in the middle of the patio, still on her call, and stared at her shoes, then out over the mezzanine onto Wilshire Boulevard. The flights of stone steps on each side framed her perfectly,

yet she still looked lost. If I felt sorry for her for half a second, the image of Jonathan getting put into a police car at Santa Monica Airport dismissed my compassion and replaced it with something much fiercer.

Jessica glanced at the wood doors then turned on her heel and went down a hall. Once she was far enough away, I handed the man his handkerchief. His back had been to her, and he didn't look around.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Keep it.” He smiled and went toward the wooden doors. I saw inside when he opened them. The room was crowded, and everyone was sitting. I

checked my phone. Nothing from Jonathan. If he was sitting at our table, getting pissed, he would have texted me.

I went down the hall. I'd come to look for Jonathan, but I thought I might hear another snippet of phone call. I was sure he was fine. Just being mysterious, as usual. I followed Jessica into the ladies room. It was a standard museum bathroom. Clean, white and blue, with midlevel fixtures and flat, warm, white lighting. My shoes echoed on the tile. If she'd been on the call in the bathroom, she either stopped talking when I entered or she'd cut the call already.

The door opened behind me, and I heard Jonathan's voice, but it wasn't him.

“—my belt, loop it once, and slap it across those sweet white cheeks until you’re pink as a rose and your face is covered with tears. I’ll stop when I can stick two fingers in your cunt and feel how sopping wet you are.”

I froze. It was undoubtedly him, from the floral metaphor, to the word cunt, to the dominant voice. Three women came in and stopped dead in their tracks when they saw me. The young woman with the phone in her hand had her hair done up like Audrey Hepburn, right down to the tiara. The

second was tall and matronly with a sweater, flat shoes, and lines of disappointment permanently etched on her face. They both wore silver pins.

The third woman was Geraldine Stark.

The recording continued.

“Then I’ll fuck you until you beg me to let you come, which I may or may not let you do. That going to work for you? Didn’t think so.”

“Do it.”

The voice was shrill and desperate and definitely Jessica’s. That must be it. The voice memo from her

stolen phone.

Audrey Hepburn fumbled with the phone, shutting it.

“I want to hear it,” I said. “From the beginning, if you don’t mind.”

She hesitated.

“I was telling them,” Geraldine said, “he’s really like this, and it’s hot. Don’t you think?” She raised an eyebrow. I didn’t answer but stared down Audrey Hepburn. She was a nervous kitten, breakable and easily bossed.

“Do it,” I said, my voice the exact opposite of Jessica’s whine.

She shrugged as if she wasn’t giving in as much as bored by the prospect of not continuing. “It’s only

really good when he starts this.”

“I’ll undo your jeans. I’ll pull them down to the middle of your thighs so it’s hard to walk. You’ll be uncomfortable, and that will please me. Then I’ll get behind you, and I’ll grab a handful of your hair at the back of your head and bend you over that table. I’ll take off my belt, loop it once, and slap it across those sweet white cheeks until you’re pink as a rose and your face is covered with tears. I’ll stop when I can stick two fingers in your cunt and feel how sopping wet you are. Then I’ll fuck you until you beg me to let you come, which I may or may not

*let you do. That going to work for you?
Didn't think so."*

"Do it."

"Jess, really."

*"Do it! Start with the hair. Or
the pants. Whatever."*

"No."

"Do it!"

Audrey cut it off. I knew what the joke was. The desperation. The pitch. An actress couldn't have reproduced something so raw. I pressed my lips between my teeth. We all knew who it was, and as it turned out, we all thought the idea of her desperately begging for a spanking was hilariously funny.

Geraldine snickered first. Then Audrey. Matronly looked as if she ate a lemon, and the crinkles in her brow sent me over the edge into laughter. Then we all broke up. Between peals of hilarity, someone would shout *do it!* in a shrill, pleading whine, and we'd laugh again.

“Do you want to hear the rest?” Audrey asked.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’ll have plenty of the real thing later. Without the *do it!*” I shrieked the last two words, and we laughed again.

I checked my face in the mirror, stood up straight, and arranged my lariat. “I’ll see you back in there.” I looked at each of them in the mirror. “Thanks for

the entertainment.”

When I got back onto the patio, I stopped at the big wooden doors and turned around, stepping behind a partition. Despite the cool, collected person who had shown up in the bathroom, I was upset at hearing Jonathan promising sex to another woman. And I was upset that everyone knew. They wouldn't see him as mine. They'd look at me and either feel sorry for poor cheated-on girl or assume I shared him with other women.

“Stop it, Monica,” I whispered to myself. “Stop caring.” I clenched my fists.

The three artists left the bathroom, giggling and commiserating. Matronly

opened one of the big wooden doors, and they were gone. Were they laughing at me? Was Geraldine talking about her nights with Jonathan, taking bets on when he'd dump me?

My name is Monica. I sing like an angel and roar like a lion. I am the owner and ruler of my mind. I keep my own counsel. I decide how I feel. I answer to no one.

I didn't realize my eyes were closed until I heard a sob and the scuffle of feet on carpet. Jessica ran out of the bathroom, crying. She stopped, and I ducked farther behind the partition. She fiddled with her phone, but she was upset and couldn't seem to get it to do

what she wanted. She tossed it in her bag and rooted around in the purse, pressing it to herself so she could dig in the bottom.

For the second time, I felt pity, but I was overwhelmed. I'd known exactly what I was doing in the bathroom. I knew she was behind a stall or a wall, yet I'd egged the girls on because I could. For what? To hurt her feelings? Wasn't I better than that? I stepped out from behind the partition. "Jessica?"

She spun and saw me. "Get away from me." She used her *do it* tone. I didn't think she could even hear it.

"Are you ok?"

She ran, still clutching her open bag, heading for the stone steps. I went

to the mezzanine railing and watched her go, feet shuffling. She lost her balance and the contents of her bag scattered. Papers and receipts fluttered down into the courtyard, lipsticks and pens clicked. A notebook opened like a butterfly three steps beneath her. She stopped and scooped up her things. Her sobs echoed off the granite walls, even as far away as she was.

“What happened to Eddie?” Jonathan stepped up behind me. “He was supposed to watch you.” I put my hand on his face. He was cold and damp.

Jessica looked up, and seeing us both looking down at her, she left half her bag’s contents and ran away them.

She tripped, skidded, righted herself, and ran onto Wilshire without looking back.

“What happened?” he asked with short breaths.

“That recording.” I didn’t want to describe the bathroom scene. I didn’t care anymore. He looked like shit, and Mister Drazen never looked like shit. “Are you all right? Where were you?”

“Looking for someone.” He crunched his eyes shut.

“Who?”

“I haven’t been feeling...” He leaned on the railing. “My back hurts and...” His knees bent. I took him by the arms and looked in his green eyes. He wasn’t all right; he was panicking. No.

That was wrong. I took out the handkerchief the man in the cashmere coat had given me and patted his face.

“You look like hell. You need to sit down.” The nearest bench was a mile away, or four steps.

He took the handkerchief. “Where did you get this?” His breath heaved as if it hurt him.

“Some guy. Tall guy, it’s fine.”

It dropped from his fingers, and I saw the black and blue embroidered letters: JDD. It all came to me. The voice, the way he had looked and walked. It had been Jonathan’s father. I was about to confirm that, but Jonathan put his head on my shoulder. I put my

arms under his, and before long, I was holding him up.

“Jonathan!” I cried for help, the sounds shrieking and echoing off the granite walls.

He fell, sliding down my body. I bent over him, rolling him onto his back. I didn't know what to do. His face told me he was in pain, his hands reached for me, clutching my arms, keeping me from moving. All I could do was shout his name.

Why was no one coming?

My phone. I had to get my phone.

I dumped the contents of my bag onto the floor, searching through the contents. I looked at him, the love of my life, finally found, finally recognized,

finally embraced, with his eyes toward the sky in surrender. I turned back to my pile of crap and found my phone through a curtain of tears. “Okay, I’m calling someone. Please just...”

His eyes closed.

“No! You shit!” I screamed his name and slapped his face.

His eyes moved under the lids.

I slapped him again.

People came.

I hit him harder.

I felt hands on me, clenching hard on the bruised parts of my arms.

I couldn’t slap him if they held me.

So I fought, and they pulled me

away.

I didn't remember anything after that.

To be Continued

[To find out what happens in the last book, get on the mailing list by clicking here.](#)

Book 7, the last of them will be released on or before 10/7. The book will be 99c the first 24 hours, and the best way to

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Songs of Submission has a Goodreads group. Join [CD](#) [Canaries](#) to get in on the discussion and trade supplemental stories.

To keep up with what I think is sexy today, check out [CD](#) [Reiss on Facebook](#). Use the mailing list button to sign up

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[Tease](#)

[Submit](#)

Bonus Stories

Jessica/Sharon

Sequence Two

Control

Burn

Resist

Sing (due Oct 7)

Rachel, the story of Jonathan's remembrance under hypnosis, is [here](#).

Sequence One is also available

as a novel-length [omni edition.](#)

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