

BREAKAWAY

The Dartmouth Cobras

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Chapter One

Mid April

Luke Carter trudged up the steps and dug his keys out of his pocket. Goosebumps rose under his dress shirt and his numb fingers shook as he tried to fit the key in the lock. He had to stop letting his roommates hog his indoor parking spot. And he needed a new spring coat. His shoulders had broadened over the last year and nothing seemed to fit right. A nice thick sweatshirt would've kept him warm, but he'd wanted to look good for his girl. He tightened his grip on the bouquet of clunky flowers, pink and white—Stargazer something or another. They smelled real nice anyway.

Nice enough for her to forgive you?

He made a face at the stupid flowers and thought back to a chat with his good buddy Landon, the Dartmouth Cobras starting goalie. The man had used books to fix things with the chick he'd been into. And that chick was now his fiancé.

Teresa ain't into books. But maybe jewellery—or something pretty. He'd forgotten their . . . third month anniversary? Which was apparently a big deal. Not that he could've known. He'd never dated a girl this long.

Either way, he knew he'd screwed up. All he had was some flowers. That would have to do for now.

After unlocking the door to the apartment he shared with teammates, Tyler Vanek, and their newest roommate, Scott Demyan—a linemate who'd gotten kicked out of his last two apartments—Luke nudged the door open and stepped inside. Then he blinked and stepped back out.

He had to be fucking seeing things.

Moving slowly over the threshold, he shook his head as his stomach turned and clenched his fist hard enough to break the flower stems in half. Teresa gasped and pushed away from where she straddled Demyan on the coach. She crossed an arm over her bare breasts, using her fingers to comb through the tangled mess of her chestnut colored bob as blotchy red covered her cheeks.

Demyan groaned and leaned forward. "Look, man, it's not what you—"

"Shut the fuck up." Luke tossed the flowers aside. "Shut the fuck up and be a fucking man, you son-of-a-bitch. You're screwing around with my girlfriend? In my house? You've got brass."

"Yep." Demyan sighed and stood, rubbing his palms on his black jeans. "That's me. Stupid enough to mess around with your woman right here where you'd catch us. Have at me if you want, might make you feel better. Then maybe you two should have a little chat."

"A chat? Seriously?" Luke slammed the door behind him. "What's there to talk about? You two enjoy each other. But do it somewhere else. Both of you get the fuck out."

"Carter, please." Teresa reached one hand out to him, her soft hair sweeping over her big, teary blue eyes. "This is my fault. I just thought—"

"Thought what? If you wanted a threesome, I might have considered it." He let out a bitter laugh, the ice in his tone seeping through his veins. "But not like this. Damn it, you haven't spoken to me in three days. I asked you to meet me here so we could work things out and—seriously, what the fuck!"

"If I wanted a *threesome*? What kind of freak do you think I am?" Teresa scowled and grabbed her shirt from the edge of the big denim sofa. "I thought this would be easier, okay? Maybe it was stupid, but I didn't know what else to do!"

Luke threw his hands up in the air. "About what? Me forgetting our anniversary? I said I was sorry! I was ready to prove it!"

"Exactly!" Teresa pulled on her shirt, then moved towards him, speaking low. "I've been acting like a total bitch to you. I figured you'd get fed up and dump me. But you didn't."

"Why would you want me to dump you?"

"Because I didn't have the heart to dump you! Not with everything going on with your mom! But I can't do this anymore! I can't be with a man like you!"

Everything inside Luke went still. His heartbeat stuttered in his chest. He heard Demyan swallow and saw him look away from the corner of his eye.

He took a deep breath. "A man like me?"

"Carter—"

"Luke." He ground his teeth. "Why don't you ever call me Luke?"

Her lips moved. Then her jaw set and she shrugged. "Because you're a hockey player. And being with a hockey player was exciting at first, but you're not the type of man a woman wants to spend her life with. I'm going to school in Ottawa this fall and I want to keep my options open. I realized this wouldn't work when I went down for a tour last month. There are so many clean cut guys with normal jobs, guys whose jobs don't make them look like—"

Demyan stood. "I think he gets the point."

Holding out his hand, Luke shook his head. "No, let her finish. Guys who don't look like what?"

"Carter—Luke. I'm sorry. Maybe it sounds shallow, but when people look at you, they see a rough hockey player. Damn it, you don't even have all your teeth and you're only twenty-two! What are you going to look like ten years from now?" She rubbed her hands over her face. "My parents asked to meet you. Can you just imagine what they would think?"

Luke traced the scar that ran down from his lip to his chin with trembling fingers. He touched his partials—which temporarily replaced two teeth he'd lost—with the tip of his tongue. All this time he'd been worried about her finding out about how he craved dominance, how much he enjoyed using ropes to tie a woman, how hot it got him to use a flogger to turn her ass nice and red. He'd stopped all that for her because she was as vanilla as a person could be, even though it meant the sex wasn't all that great for him. But fuck, he loved her. He would have given up everything except the game for her.

Even if he *had* been willing to give that up, it wouldn't have made a difference. He was damaged. Flawed. He saw it whenever he looked in the mirror. It had been pretty stupid to expect her not to.

"How long have you stayed because you felt sorry for me?"

"Luke—"

"How. Long?"

She folded her arms over her stomach. "Two months."

Jesus fucking Christ. He sucked his teeth and nodded. "Get out."

"I'm so sorry—"

He reached behind him and threw the door open. "I said get out!"

Not waiting to see her leave, Luke walked to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and got himself a beer. He drank half while leaning into the fridge. And sighed when he heard Demyan step up behind him.

"I'm surprised you didn't go after her." The bottle hit Luke's teeth as he gave Demyan a tight smile. "She's your type."

"That she is. Shallow, selfish, and stupid. An asshole like me doesn't aim any higher."

"You expect me to feel sorry for you?"

"Fuck no. The stuff I told you while I was fucking plastered wasn't for pity." Demyan shrugged, staring at the wall behind Luke. "I just thought you knew me better, that's all."

Damn it, busting up the man's pretty face would make him feel real good, but he *did* know him better. And they didn't need this shit messing up the way they gelled on the ice. "She just threw herself at you, didn't she?"

Demyan reached around him to grab a beer. "Yeah, after sitting beside me and telling me how horrible she felt wanting to break up with you while your mom's sick and all. I kinda patted her back and told her she needed to tell you what she was telling me. Then she heard you pull up and just climbed on top of me and took off her shirt."

"Fuck me."

"My words exactly. Hell, with my reputation, I didn't expect you to believe me if I told you I hadn't done anything. And I didn't expect her to come clean."

Luke's whole body ached worse than when their fucking Captain, Sloan Callahan, put them through their paces the morning after a bad loss. His heart felt like it had fallen victim to a sledgehammer. Why the hell had he gotten all wrapped up in a relationship anyway? They never worked out, his parents were living proof of that.

"I'm gonna head to the club, I haven't been there in awhile." Luke finished off his beer and stepped back to close the fridge. "You wanna come?"

"Sure. As long as I don't need to be packing up my shit?"

"Hey, you know what they say." Luke clinked his empty bottle to Demyan's still half full one. "Bros before hoes."

"They do say that." Demyan tipped his beer to his lips, not coming up for air until he was finished. Then he belched and laughed. "But *they* never mean it."

"Well I do." Luke set his bottle on the counter and headed for the door. "From now fucking on."

* * * *

Pink and blue flashing lights. The sweet, slick perfume of sex. Two pairs of naked breasts pressed together as red lips met in a passionate kiss. A stage full of lust for a handful of cash.

Luke leaned forward and slipped a hundred dollar bill into the curvy blonde's g-string. She glanced down and gave him a sultry smile before bending down to suck on her 'dance' partners nice big nipples, one after the other. His dick jabbed at the inside of his zipper, throbbing with the kind of pain he craved when he needed to feel enough for his brain to shut the fuck up.

Not enough though. Not yet. He shifted as the women resumed fondling one another.

And I gave this up for her? His lips curled away from his teeth in a sneer. Good thing he'd come to the club on a night when the ladies were scheduled to put on a show. Something Silver Delgado, the club owner's girlfriend and partial owner of the Dartmouth Cobras, had come up with a few months back to up the club's income. And he'd missed out on all this while trying to be the relationship kind of guy.

Not because he suddenly wanted to settle down. No, it was for his mom. She'd just found out she had an inoperable brain tumor. Since his dad left them, all they'd had was each other. She was scared that she'd die and he'd be alone. So she'd asked the impossible of him. She desperately needed to live to see him get married, and her doctors said she only had a year or two left. His shock had changed her tone pretty fast, and before he had a chance to say a word she'd whispered 'Can you at least find a girl who you might want to marry, one day?'

He'd thought he could. He'd thought he had. It hadn't been horrible either. Teresa had been cool to have around when he wasn't on the road. She'd met his mom who absolutely loved her.

I loved her.

His stupid brain was going into overdrive. He shook as he pictured her all over Demyan, as he heard her telling him his fucked up face disgusted her—fine, not in exactly those words, but—

Shut up!

He smashed the bottle in his hand against the side of the stage. The neck snapped off in his fist, cutting his palm. He drew in air and pain and shoveled the depressing thoughts into the back of his head. Teresa didn't matter. All that mattered was what his mom, what she expected from him.

Sitting on the edge of her hospital bed at the end of the All Star break in January, Luke had held her cold hands between his. "I don't have to go, mom. They can bring up someone else to—"

"They need you. You won't do any good hanging around here while I'm getting tests. I'm not going to stop living and I don't want you to either." She brought her hand up before he could argue. "My sister is coming to stay with me. I'll be fine."

"I won't be able to play good."

"Lucas Isaiah Carter, you better play good." She laughed when he winced at her use of his full name. Then she touched his cheek and whispered. "Don't dwell on this. Give me a reason to cheer each and every game. I'll be watching you."

His mom didn't ask him for much and this was something he could do. At first he'd felt guilty, acting all normal with her still in the hospital, but every time he called she seemed stronger and finally she got to go home. And the act became real. Hell, people lived longer than doctors said they would all the time. Maybe she'd get better.

She still wants to see me happily married though.

Well, she didn't need to know he wasn't with Teresa. Not yet anyway. He could do that much for her, let her live with the illusion that her only child would one day give her grandbabies.

The heat from the cut on his palm spread and he frowned as blood dripped on his shoe. Then he glared at Demyan who was shaking him, snapping out nonsensical words.

Fingers raked into Luke's hair and his head was jerked back. A hot minty breath flowed over his face as Chicklet, his mentor at the club, moved in close. "Come with me. Now."

He didn't even consider arguing with her. Then again, no one argued with Chicklet—not even Dean Richter, the Cobras general manager and owner of the club. She was the kind of Domme that could make even the most dominant man submit to some extent.

Not that Luke would *ever* submit to *anyone*.

She shoved him onto a leather sofa near the bar and went to the bar for a towel. After wrapping his hand tight, she straightened and put her hands on her hips. "What's up with you? You wanna hurt, you know I'll hurt you." She jutted her chin at his hand. "And I won't fuck up your stick handling when I do it."

Luke clenched his fist around the towel and shrugged. "It was an accident."

"Maybe so. But you took your sweet time taking care of it. And you weren't hearing Demyan when he told you your hand was bleeding all over the place." Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. "Where's your head at kid? You completely zoned out."

"Just broke up with my girlfriend—no big deal." He gave Chicklet his most charming smile, even though he knew it wouldn't work on her. She had two subs—one of them his roommate, Tyler Vanek, and even that angel-faced SOB got the Full Metal Jacket treatment when he pissed Chicklet off. But he had to try. "You wanna know what I was thinking? Tyler's gone for a little while, trying to get his brain fixed." Wiggling his eyebrows, he let his gaze roam over her curvy, leather clad body. "He won't mind if we have some fun while he's gone, will he?"

Chicklet's lips drew into a hard, mean line. "No, I don't think he'll mind at all. Stand up, boy."

Boy? He rolled his eyes and stood. "Chicklet, I ain't a sub—you know that, right?"

She smirked and glanced over to the right. "Wayne, you mind holding him for me?"

"Not at all." The huge bouncer came up behind Luke and shackled his wrists in big, beefy hands, jerking them back until his shoulders ached from the strain. "Where do you want him?"

"Get him in the upright stocks. The steel ones."

Twisting his wrists, Luke stared at Chicklet. "Whoa, wait a second—"

"You know the club safeword, boy." Chicklet arched a brow. "Ready to use it already?"

"No I'm not ready to use it. I'm also not letting you put me in the fucking stocks."

"Not letting me?" Chuckling, Chicklet motioned for Wayne to go. "Try to stop me, it'll be fun to watch."

Ignoring Luke's snarling protests, Wayne dragged him to the stocks, twisting his arm when he refused to bend down to them. The stocks were T-shaped, with metal cuffs built in at the ends which were quickly snapped around Luke's wrists, spreading his arms wide. At the end of the V base, shackles on short chains welded into the steel were set up to restrain his ankles. He fought harder to keep Wayne from getting them on him, but the man muscled him into position easily and slapped his thigh when he tried to kick him.

"Behave, boy," Wayne said in the same tone he used with his slave.

Rage pooled up from Luke's guts to his throat, lava hot and thick enough to choke on. "Don't call me boy, you big ugly gorilla."

The brisk click of Chicklet's boot heels drew his attention just long enough for Wayne to lock the last shackle. Chicklet used the end of a riding crop to tip Luke's chin up. "Wayne gets five in for the insult, *boy*. I suggest you think before you open your mouth again."

Eyes narrowed, Luke watched Chicklet set a big white medical kit on the floor. "What the hell do you think you're doing, woman?"

Chicklet straightened. "Mistress."

"Are you serious? You've never made me call you Mistress before."

"Very observant."

How the hell was he supposed to have a reasonable conversation in this ridiculous position? He tugged until his wounded hand, still wrapped in the towel, pulsed as though he had his heart in his fist. "So why now?"

Lips pursed, Chicklet paced in front of him, checking his restrained wrists, running her hands over his shoulders and testing the muscles with her fingertips. Finally she stopped in front of him and squared her shoulders. "Because you need it. I feel like an idiot for not seeing it before, for easing off after giving you a little taste of submission."

"I'm not a submissive." He closed his eyes after another tug and took a deep breath. "Let me go, Chicklet. I get that you're trying to help, but you're wrong about me. I don't need this."

"Don't you?" Leaving one hand on his shoulder, Chicklet leaned close enough for her lips to brush his ear. "Let go for a moment and let yourself feel the restraints. Stop thinking about being a Dom. About what you *should* need. You don't get to decide that now."

Her soft tone soothed him, and he almost relaxed, almost admitted that not having to decide anything felt kinda good. But then he opened his eyes and saw people staring. Demyan, who'd given up watching the dancers. Wayne's slave who distractedly served the people at the bar. Laura, Chicklet's other sub, kneeling by a bar stool with a calm expression on her face as though she saw her Mistress handle men like this all the time.

Which she did. She saw Chicklet handle Tyler like this.

But Tyler *was* a sub.

Gritting his teeth, Luke glared at Chicklet. "Let. Me. Go."

Chicklet clucked her tongue. "You worry too much about what others see when they look at you. Use the safeword or shut up and let me take care of you."

He continued to glare at her, but didn't say a word.

"That's my boy." She looked over his shoulder. "Master Wayne, please take care of his hand. I'm going to fetch a few things from behind the bar."

As she walked away, Wayne came to his side and unwound the towel from his hand. He took out a flat gauze and covered the slowly oozing cut with it, then wrapped a bandage around Luke's hand. After taping it in place, he rose and folded his arms over his chest.

"What's eating at you, boy?" He took hold of Luke's chin when he tried to look away. Somehow he looked less ugly and more . . . powerful, standing over him. "You know, most good Doms submit at one point just to see what it's like. I've done it."

Luke's brow shot up and he lifted his chest off the bar as much as he could to face the man. "You?"

"Yes. Me." Wayne grinned. "Wasn't my thing, but I gave it a shot. Won't hurt you to do the same."

Snorting, Luke looked over to where Chicklet was approaching with her whole toy bag. "With Chicklet? I'd be disappointed if it *didn't* hurt."

Chicklet smiled. "That's the most honest thing you've said tonight. Don't worry, boy, I'll hurt you."

Luke's eyes went wide. He shook his head. "That isn't what I meant."

"That's exactly what you meant. You're not fooling anyone, Carter." She knelt, unzipped her toy bag, and pulled out a blindfold. "What you felt when you cut your hand is nothing compared to what you'll feel when I'm done with you. You wanna negotiate, you better do it now, because after I put this on you I don't want to hear another word."

"Negotiate?" Luke let out a nervous laugh. "Come near me with a strap-on, *Mistress*, and you better never take these restraints off."

"So noted. I planned to keep this scene non-sexual anyway."

He swallowed and went still as she put the blindfold on him. Non-sexual. Which could only mean one thing as far as he knew.

Darkness stole the last of his resistance. He couldn't see anyone staring, so it was like they weren't there. "You *are* going to hurt me."

He heard Chicklet, and possibly Wayne, moving around him. Someone rolled his shirt up to his shoulders. Someone else undid his belt and slid his jeans and boxers down enough to bare his ass.

"I will, but only after Wayne does." Chicklet—it must have been Chicklet, because the lips were soft and her voice sounded close—kissed his cheek. "Count for me."

The *Snap!* came with a hot lick of fire across his ass. He clenched his butt and sucked in air as the sensation travelled down to his balls. *Holy shit!*

He groaned and whispered. "One."

Four more, harder, without pause, and he was panting against the urge to come. Forcing himself to count helped him hold back, but when smooth hands caressed his burning flesh he shuddered as the tip of his dick moistened with pre-cum.

"You're doing good, boy. Very good." Chicklet's approval made him feel bigger somehow. Stronger. Like he wasn't completely pathetic for letting her do this to him. "I'm going to play with you for a bit, put you in a good place. And you will not come."

"This won't make me come." He almost added 'bitch' because being told what to do irked him, but he knew what kinds of toys she had in that bag. And he liked his nuts just as they were, thank you very much.

Clicking heels. A long body, both soft and hard in all the right places, pressed against his back. "You're so close, pet. I can tell. But if you're good, I'll let you go with your buddy, Demyan, and fuck one of those strippers. The redhead on stage now is an old favorite of Sloan's. She'll take good care of you both."

Luke groaned. And nodded. That sounded like a good reward. Not that he needed her permission to fuck anyone, but somehow, getting it, made it seem more . . . appealing.

Chicklet moved away from him. He heard a familiar *Whoosh* and braced himself. A sharp biting pain spread over his ass, snapping at the end. He grunted as the pain flared out and his eyes watered as she hit him again and again. His balls ached with the need to come, but he focussed on the heat, absorbing it, allowing it to consume him.

A woman's screams pierced his skull. The kind of screams he got off on drawing from a woman using the exact same tools Chicklet was using on him. His muscles became rock hard, to the point that the tension hurt more than the bite of the flogger. The steady strokes eased off. His brain snapped back into place and everything that had brought him here came to him at once. He couldn't be a good boyfriend. He was a lousy Dom. Maybe all he was good for was getting beaten on. He was so fucking weak.

The blindfold was torn away and he blinked as the dim lights of the club blinded him.

"Carter, look at me." Chicklet held his face between his hands. "You stiffened up. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" He laughed and clenched his wounded hand over the bandage until he could feel the moisture of fresh blood. But it didn't hurt. Nothing hurt and goddamn it he wanted it to. "I'm weak. You wouldn't have me here like this if I wasn't. I'm disgusted with myself, okay?"

"Damn." Chicklet shook her head. "I've never had a sub drop *during* a scene."

"This isn't a fucking drop! I need more! It felt good. Too good. And it shouldn't."

"It shouldn't? Is that what you're going to tell your next sub? That she shouldn't enjoy what you're doing to her?"

Luke blinked. "My next sub? But I thought you'd decided I was—"

"Take him down, Wayne." Chicklet massaged her temples with her fingers. "Honestly, I can't figure out what you are, Carter. You don't have the confidence to be a good Dom. You enjoy receiving pain, but you can't submit completely. And since you don't know what you want, you obviously can't tell me. I'm not a fucking mind reader. I just hope this helped you a little."

"It helped." His legs felt rubbery as Wayne freed him and helped him stand. But nausea almost floored him. He was such a loser. At least Tyler knew what he wanted. He embraced it. No one could call him pathetic for kneeling to Chicklet because it seemed so natural. And the Doms on the team all wielded their power with unwavering confidence. Chicklet was right, Luke didn't have that. Not as a Dom, not even as a fucking man.

His eyes burned and he wrenched away from Wayne.

"Can I go now?"

"Not yet." Chicklet nodded to Wayne and the man latched an arm around Luke's neck and wrestled him across the room to a sofa. He held Luke until he stopped struggling. Chicklet brought him a bottle of water from the bar. And a piece of chocolate. "We'll let you go when you're stable again."

"Chocolate?" Luke let out a rough laugh and took the water bottle. He gulped it all down and eyed the chocolate. "You gotta treat me like a chick now too?"

"You think only chicks like chocolate?" Chicklet asked.

"I know they love it when they're on their rag. Are Domme's like that too?"

"Just eat the fucking chocolate, Carter." Chicklet shoved the brown chunk at him and glared at him until he ate it. "This didn't turn out the way I wanted it to. You're too stubborn. If you need a Dom, man or woman, I hope they're up to the challenge. You're a pain in the ass."

"Thank you." Luke grinned, actually feeling a bit better—not that he'd admit it. He was the good kinda sore, like after a hard workout. And that put everything in perspective. Wayne was an honest guy. If he said some Doms did this, then they did. And either way, he'd earned his reward. When Wayne let him go, he stood and did a seductive dance to the stripper music to prove to Chicklet he was good. "You ready to let me off the leash now, *Mistress*?"

"I'd be an idiot to put you on my leash, kid. But yeah, you can go." Her lips twisted as she studied him. "I like how quick you pop back though. But it might not last. Give me a call if you start feeling shitty again."

"Will do." Luke tugged the sweat clumps hair over his brow like a cowboy tipping his hat and sauntered away. He slapped Demyan's shoulder when he stepped up to his side. "You into sharing? Apparently the redheaded stripper likes it."

"Yeah, I don't mind sharing." Demyan scratched the golden scruff on his jaw. "Hey, you okay? That was—"

"Hey, you wanna be a Dom here?" Luke laughed at Demyan's hesitant nod. The man had been coming to the club for months, but hadn't committed to anything. "Well, you might want to keep this in mind. Apparently a 'good Dom' learns about submission before he learns about control."

"All of a sudden, being vanilla doesn't seem all that bad." Demyan eyed the redhead who stood to the side of the stage, talking to Chicklet, as though wondering if vanilla would be enough for the woman. "I'm cool with fucking her if she wants it, but besides that . . ."

Luke chuckled and made a 'come hither' gesture with his hand when the redhead glanced over at him. "Why make things complicated? She's hot. She's willing. You need more than that?"

Demyan paused, then shook his head. "Nope. That works for me."

They took the woman, whose name was Roxy, back to their apartment. And enjoyed her all night long. In every way possible.

And Luke almost managed to convince himself *he* didn't need more. After the third time, driving deep into her cunt while Demyan rammed into her ass, he almost believe it.

Almost.

* * * *

The metallic grind of the skate sharpener sliced through the chattering and giggling about the 'drool-worthy' Dartmouth Cobras. Mission accomplished. Jami Richter clicked off the power to the machine and glanced over her shoulder at the crowd of perky blonds and busty brunettes sitting on the benches in the locker room, gawking. "Sorry about that." Damn, she almost sounded like she meant it! "Just got one more."

Ignoring the irritated muttering, Jami let her dark blue hair fall over her face and focused on getting just the right edge. She'd need it here, and not just at the bottom of her skate blades. All those girls knew she had no business trying-out to be a Dartmouth Cobra Ice Girl—and worse, that she'd been given an unfair advantage by being bumped into the top 100.

"Hey." A petite Asian girl, one of the few girls who hadn't been giving her dirty looks all morning, slipped up to her side and picked up the skate Jami had just finished with. "I like your skates."

Bullshit. Jami tongued her upper lip and stifled the urge to snatch her skate back. Her skates were black vintage with yellow happy face laces. Everyone turned their noses up at them, but they'd been her grandmother's—they made her feel lucky. Like her grandma was still around instead of back in Halifax. And with grandma around, she was less likely to fall on her ass.

Not that she'd admit that to this cutsy little dollface. But she *would* be polite until the girl gave her a reason not to be. "Thank you."

"You're great on the ice, though. Why aren't you working on the dancing? I haven't seen you with any of the choreographers yet."

Testing the edge on her blade with her thumb, Jami shrugged. "I'll get to it."

"Akira, I wouldn't be getting all friendly with her if I were you." The only redhead in the group set her curling iron on a metal table by the lockers and smiled sweetly. "She's probably the reason you'll be heading back to Hong Kong this summer."

"My parents are from Japan." Akira ducked her head, speaking too low for anyone but Jami to catch a word. "And I was born in Calgary."

"What did you say?" Red stood and smirked at the snickering twits around her. "Speak up, girl! They need to hear you out on the ice when you're cheering the team!"

Their uniforms—black and gold mid-drift halters with the Cobra logo, and black short skirts—might make them all look pretty much the same to some, but they couldn't be more different. Obviously not one of those bitches called Red on her shit.

But I'm not one of them. Jami pressed her thumb down on the blade until it cut her thumb. The sharp bite of pain sent a cool, calming rush through her veins. She jutted her chin towards Red, then winked at Akira. "This is what happens when inbreeding becomes obvious."

Akira covered her mouth with her hands. Her porcelain features lost the little color they had. Red's face looked like every blood vessel in her cheeks had exploded. "She said that?"

"No. I did." Jami set down her skate. "Want to make something of it?"

Please say yes.

"As if." Red snorted. "Your daddy and his fuck friend run the team. I'm not stupid."

Brow arched, Jami looked her over. "So you just wear the mask to impress people?"

Tugging at her arm, Akira muttered under her breath. "Please don't fight with her. She's the most popular girl in the group and the judges already love her. Everyone knows why you're here, but no one can argue that you have skills. If you can dance, you're a sure bet."

"What if I can't dance?" Jami winced when she realized she'd said that out loud. Not a good thing to share with the competition. She frowned at her bloody thumb, then stuck it in her mouth. Warm copper slicked her tongue. *Yuck.* A bit too much. She looked around for somewhere to spit and nodded her thanks when Akira handed her a towel. Mouth relatively clean, pressure on her thumb, she studied Akira, trying to figure out her angle. "Why do you care if I make it or not?"

"Honestly?" Akira managed to maneuver her out of the locker room and into the hall before Red came up with a good comeback. Something about DP that was muffled by the closing door. The tiny girl released her once they were well out of hearing. "You're interesting, and so far you're not mean. I'd rather be out there, at the end of all this, with you than her."

Fair enough. "So you don't resent me for butting in?"

"Not at all. I think you would have made it anyway." Akira's smile faded away as three huge men strode towards them. She half hid behind Jami as they paused, side by side, completely blocking the hallway.

Jami ducked her head as Dominik Mason, the Cobras big black defenseman, reached out to ruffle her hair.

"I didn't know you were back, kid. How are you?"

"Not bad. Just getting settled in." Jami couldn't tell him more. Not until she had a chance to talk to her father. He knew she was back, but that was about it. They'd argued enough about her moving into her own place—her grandmother saved her on that one by pointing out that *she'd*

found the apartment and loaned Jami the money for first and last month's rent—and she really wasn't up to getting into why she was back just yet.

Dominik's lips drew into a thin line as he studied her face. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure"

"Are you opposed to me telling your father we saw you here?"

Okay, that was just scary. How the hell had he figured that out? She eyed the other two players, Sloan Callahan, the freakin' team's captain, and Max Perron. These men, and several others on the team, had become like older brothers over the last five years, ever since her father had taken over as General Manager. They saw her around the Forum and treated her like she was still that awkward fourteen year old girl they'd first met. She didn't see Max telling on her. He had this sweet cowboy thing going for him and she didn't buy that he was a 'Dominant', but Dominik and Sloan . . . ?

She let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. "I'd like the chance to tell him myself."

"See that you do," Sloan said.

Max remained behind for a moment as the other men continued down the hall. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Stay out of trouble, you hear?" He grinned when she nodded and glanced over at Akira. "Don't look so scared, hon. Not one man on this team will touch you unless you want him to. Any try and you come talk to me. Understand?"

Akira must have done something besides tremble behind her, because Max inclined his head and strode off to join the others.

Jami turned around and laughed when she saw the stricken look on Akira's face. "Haven't you met any of the players before?"

Lips moving soundlessly, Akira shook her head.

"Well, as you can see, they're pretty cool—"

"They're so big." Akira hugged herself and stared down the hall. "Oh god . . . I don't know if I can do this."

At first, Jami had assumed that Akira was just overwhelmed because, like all the other girls, she idolized the players. But Max was right. She was scared.

"What is it, Akira? Is it the try-outs that scare you? Or" Or what? Big hockey players? Not one girl here didn't love the game. Except Jami. But she was good at faking it. "You just said you'd rather be on the ice with me. Don't be ditching me now."

"I'm not." Akira didn't speak again until they were at the doors to the forum's workout room. Then she pressed her eyes shut and put her hand on her throat. "I just don't like men getting too close. I love watching them out there, but . . ."

Aww fuck. The poor kid. Jami gave her a one armed hug. "You want to talk about it? We can take off for a bit, grab something to eat and chat?"

Akira shook her head. "No. I have to do this. It took forever to talk my parents into letting me try out. I'll get over it. I *told* them I was over it."

"You came all the way from Calgary by yourself?"

"Yes. But it's okay, I'm used to travelling alone." Akira wrinkled her nose. "And dealing with people like Amy Drisdain—the red-head." She added at Jami's blank look. "I've been all over for figure skating competitions, but my parents couldn't support my dream of going professional anymore and I wasn't winning any medals. Thankfully my father *loves* hockey, or he wouldn't have given me this last shot at a career on the ice. I'm hoping to use the prize money to open my own school in a few years. Help other girls succeed where I haven't. I *can't* give up now."

Jami inhaled deep. "Damn girl, you are my new idol. I wish I had half your dedication. I'm doing this because I thought it might be fun. Pretty shallow, right?"

"Is that really the only reason?"

Making a face, Jami pushed open the door to the gym and shrugged. "I've never supported my dad. Never cared about what he was doing. I figured maybe this was a good way to show I've changed."

Straightening to her full height of five foot nothing, Akira faced her. "Well, I don't think that's shallow at all."

Jami laughed and stepped into the gym, deciding that she'd made a new friend and she'd knock some teeth in if anyone else dissed her. Inside, a dozen girls stretched out on the mats, eyes fixed on the tall woman in the center of the room wearing a black leotard.

And the massive, muscular, drop-dead gorgeous stud beside her. Sebastian Ramos, the new Cobra defenseman. She might not pay much attention to hockey anymore, but she'd snatched up the magazine with him on the cover and shamelessly drooled over his photos for weeks. And he was even more mouthwatering in person. Her pulse beat double time. Her palms dampened. His black hair, done up in a low ponytail, flowed over one broad shoulder, thick and glossy as the mane of a prize stallion. His white tank top and black shorts revealed thick, tanned arms and

thighs which couldn't possibly be as hard as they looked. The urge to test their solidity with her teeth made it so she couldn't even voice an apology when the dance instructor frowned and waved her and Akira into the room.

"As I was saying, please don't take it personally if you're not chosen for the pictures. The magazine has been very specific as to what they're looking for. And posing does not guarantee anyone a spot in the final round. Make sure you look your best out there and forget about the silly promo." A blush rose high on the woman's cheeks as she looked over at Sebastian. "No offense."

Silly promo? Are you kidding me? Jami took a quick look around the room at her competition. One of them would be chosen to take pictures with *him*. Unless she got herself noticed. Or . . . *Who do I have to kill to get picked?*

"No offense taken, Madame." Sebastian clasped one hand to his wrist behind his back and strolled around the room in a wide circle. Jami and Akira scrambled to the empty mats at the back of the room, barely managing to compose themselves before he reached them. His gaze didn't stay on Akira long as she cowered on her mat in a half-crouched position, but they locked on Jami as she knelt. "Eso se ve bien, preciosa."

Is it horrible that I don't care what that means? As long as he kept looking at her like she was the only woman in the room. Kept talking to her in that voice that languidly melted through her like hot caramel drizzling into her core. If he did all that, he could say—*or do*—whatever he wanted to her.

The workout room had turned into a sauna. The instructor was showing the other girls a routine, but they all faded away as Sebastian moved closer to her. Her lips parted as he reached down and brushed a lightly calloused fingertip along her jaw.

"Very pretty, mi cielo." The edge of his mouth tilted up as he lifted a strand of her hair. "You are different than the other girls. I will position you how I like."

The heat from his single touch spread everywhere. Her eyes widened and she barely avoided squeaking. "Position?"

His brow furrowed slightly. "I am sorry, that came out wrong. Your instructor and I have chosen you for the photo shoot. With me." He took his hand from her hair and gave Akira a tender smile. "You have been chosen as well."

Akira looked ready to pass out.

Sebastian took a knee in front of her. "Little one, take a breath for me." The alluring quality in his voice seemed to have been toned down, releasing Jami from its thrall and calming Akira. As the small girl obediently took a breath, Sebastian's smile broadened. "Very good. Now, you will not do this since it makes you uncomfortable."

"But—"

"No. We will find someone else. Stay here and dance, pequena." He rose to his feet and held his hand out to Jami. "You will come with me."

Her hand was almost in his before she caught herself. Her body might be willing to go wherever he took her, her brain kicked in with a great big 'Slow down'. She was here to prove something to her father. And herself. If she didn't learn the moves, getting bumped ahead of all the hopefuls wouldn't count for anything. It was all on her now.

Ugh. Can't you save the dedication for another time?

The naughty little voice in her head wasn't gonna win this time. Besides, she *had* changed. Last year she would have flirted shamelessly and made it clear he just had to say where and when. She'd been wild and reckless. Grandma called it stupid.

'You can have fun without getting yourself in trouble, girly,' Grandma had said after Grandpa Fred found her in the old shed behind their house with the boy next door. 'Make the boys work for it, you'll both enjoy it more.'

No one would consider Sebastian a boy, but hell, if he wanted her, why make it easy for him?

She withdrew her hand slowly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ramos, but I haven't learned the routine yet and this is my last chance." Okay, she'd need more than one session to learn the moves and do them without coming across as a clumsy, two-left-footed monkey, but he didn't need to know that. "Can I meet up with you after you're finished with the other girls?"

His brow furrowed slightly, but he nodded. "You may. Fourth floor, office 409."

"All right."

"And, mi cielo?"

She shivered as that alluring timber seeped into her skin, heating her blood enough to evaporate her token resistance. She put some pressure on her cut thumb and looked up at him.

"Yes?"

"Don't make me wait too long."

Chapter Two

Sebastian rolled his shoulders and let the photographer's assistant spray him with oil, hardly breathing as the man rubbed it in, putting a bit more pressure than necessary into his stomach muscles, inches above his stirring cock. More than once . . . Henry, yes, that was his name, had moved in so close his breath stirred the curly, dark hairs above Sebastian's shorts. Sebastian gave the man a heavy lidded once over. His mouth was nice and soft, his bottom lip plump, wet from licking it again and again. Sebastian didn't tolerate teasing.

"Go lock the door." Sebastian put his hands on his hips as Henry froze and gaped up at him, cheeks crimson under the dusting of black scruff. He gave the man a slow smile. "I apologize. Perhaps I've misread your intentions."

"No, I just . . ." Henry fisted his oil slicked hands by his sides. "It would be unprofessional of me to—"

"What is it you want to do to me, Henry?" Sebastian let the *r* roll off his tongue and smiled as the man shuddered. "You're here to prepare me for the last set of photos. You've tested my endurance, hovering around my cock, practically drooling, making it clear you want me to shove it down your throat." He grabbed Henry by the back of the head and pulled him close to whisper against his lips as he ground his dick into the smaller man's stomach. "This photo shoot is important for the team. I won't do the last set with a hard-on. If it pleases you, consider this part of your job."

Henry groaned and panted into his mouth. "I'm not gay."

"I never said you were." Sebastian traced his tongue along Henry's bottom lip. "Now go lock the door."

Seconds later, the lock clicked. Henry tripped forward, dropping hard on his knees and pulling Sebastian's shorts down past his hips. So clumsy. So abrupt. Not what Sebastian was used to. But he had to get himself in hand before *that* girl arrived.

"Do you have a condom?" His jaw clenched as he caught the ice in his tone. He never treated even casual lovers this callously.

Henry simply nodded, breathing hard as he pulled a condom from his back pocket and quickly covered him. At least the man came prepared.

Hot lips closed around his dick, but all he could see was the girl's big eyes, fresh spring green and blue with tiny flecks of gold like the first light of dawn around her wide pupils. Strange colored hair, like the night sky lit by the glow of LA, more blue than black, but it suited her somehow. She reminded him of a rare piece of art, something risqué and original. He collected rare pieces, always finding a way to possess them, no matter the price. But possessing a beautiful man or woman didn't usually cost him a thing. They could be purchased with the right words, the right touch.

If I had any interest in wasting my time with shallow affairs.

A sloppy suck brought a growl from him and he put his hand on the back of Henry's head to guide him. If it hadn't been so long since he'd gotten off with anything but his own hand, he wouldn't have bothered with Henry. He had played with submissives at the club for a while because they were discrete. Right under the noses of his own teammates he could take a man and a woman into a private room and fuck them both with none the wiser. But it had become more and more difficult as he grew to like the other players and hiding brought shame that made it impossible to even get hard. He had stopped wasting his time over two months ago.

The way the sky haired beauty had knelt and stared up at him made him feel pure, raw lust for the first time in what seemed like forever. He could already see his marks on her lightly tanned flesh, from his belt, his whip, his fingers digging into her hips . . .

Teeth grazed him and he sucked in a deep, calming breath. "Don't move."

Thrusting hard, Sebastian let his mind latch onto taking the girl and grunted as the pressure built up in his balls and exploded through his cock. He threw his head back as he came.

Henry was on his feet before Sebastian's dick stopped throbbing. "Fuck, that was . . . just seeing you getting off because of me . . ."

Too easy. The man hadn't found his own release. Sebastian shook his head and went to the supply table between the black curtained windows, removing the condom and using a wipe to clean himself. He disposed of the wipe and the condom, then pulled up his shorts. "I am not a selfish lover, Henry. Give me a few moments and I will—"

"Fuck man, I would, but" Henry scratched his jaw. "My boyfriend won't mind me sucking you off, he'll get it. But if I let you fuck me . . . well, that would bother him."

Boyfriend? Sebastian laughed. *Eros estupido, Ramos.* Had he really bought the 'I'm not gay' line? It wasn't the first time a man had used it, and likely wouldn't be the last. He got off on

seducing straight men, and there was the added bonus of discretion—perhaps word was getting around . . . ? No, the tabloids were still speculating about his preferences and none of the men on the team had mentioned it. And they would if they thought he was gay. A man on his team in LA had come out and the players never treated him the same. No one spoke of it. Or really spoke to him. The man had looked relieved when he was traded. Sebastian hadn't felt the same when the Kings had made no effort to keep him. Apparently suspicions were enough. He knew very well he wasn't being traded because he didn't help improve the team. His agent told him not to worry about it, but how could he not? He'd proved himself, damn it. But his personal choices were enough to ruin him.

"Hey, could I have something of yours as . . . you know, a souvenir?" Henry dropped his gaze when Sebastian's eyes narrowed. "Just for me. I won't tell no one."

Letting out a sound of disgust, Sebastian went to his abandoned pile of clothes, a white tank top and dress shirt, and tossed the sweat stained tank top to the man. "I suggest you don't."

His teammates would likely be surprised to know that puck bunnies weren't exclusively female. Bile rose in his throat as he imagined Henry and his boyfriend discussing how he'd done someone on his 'list'. Using his tank top in their fantasies. Any guilt he'd had over his rough usage of Henry disappeared. Nothing he'd done would make Henry feel cheap.

A soft rap on the door spilled hope over his bitterness. Maybe it was her. And now that he wasn't trapped in a haze of lust, he would be able to handle her with the delicacy she obviously needed. Loose women never made him wait. Perhaps, for once, he had found a woman worth more than a brief interlude on a day that didn't have a game to stir his blood.

Anyone worth more would be a nice change.

"I would like a moment to acquaint myself with the girl before we start, if you do not mind." Sebastian considered his rumpled dress shirt, wondering if he should put it back on so as not to intimidate the girl. His size seemed to scare away the sweet ones.

Henry nodded distractedly as he pulled his cell from the pocket of his slacks. "I'll tell Chantelle to give you two a bit before she comes in."

Sebastian picked up his shirt as Henry opened the door. His 'mi cielo' stepped into the office, her hands clasped over her tiny black skirt, her head bowed. Shy, perhaps?

"I did it!" Henry shouted as he slipped out and slammed the door behind him.

The muscles in his jaw ached as he ground his teeth. He moved to pull on his shirt, then paused as the girl whispered, "don't bother."

He dropped his shirt and turned slowly. "Mi cielo—"

"Jami."

"Jami." A soft smile curved his lips. "Come. Sit with me." He drew two chairs away from the table and turned them facing one another. Held his hand out for her to sit.

She moved towards him, her gaze brushing over his bare chest, darting down, then snapping back up. "You're all shiny."

"Yes." He chuckled when a charming, pink glow spread over her cheeks. The girl was reacting to him physically—probably in a way she didn't fully understand. He had to be very very careful not to let it frighten her. "For the cameras. They will put some on you as well."

"Why?"

He waited until she settled down in one chair, crossing her legs and smoothing her skirt over her thighs. Her hands flattened over the hem of her skirt as though she didn't trust it to stay in place. He reached out and ran his fingertips lightly over the back of her hand.

"To give you a wet look."

Her eyes widened and her blush deepened. "Did they do that to the other girls?"

"They did. But you have nothing to worry about. The photographer is a woman and she will slick the oil over your flesh herself. I have told her how I want you positioned with me. I will hardly touch you at all."

The pulse along the curve of her throat quickened. "Where will you touch me?"

Standing, he moved behind her, slowly, very slowly, and curved his hand around the nape of her neck. "Only here."

She drew in a rough inhale. "And how will I be positioned?"

Smiling, he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "On your knees."

* * * *

'On your knees'. Jami shuddered. Damn, what the hell was she supposed to do with that? Or with the fact that she could already see herself, kneeling before Sebastian, waiting for . . .

Waiting for what? Since when did she wait for what she wanted? Did she really want to grovel to the man just to get a taste of him? No freakin' way. She wouldn't rush anything, but she

wasn't a damn shrinking violet. At very least she had to show Sebastian that he didn't have to treat her like an innocent virgin. Or a sub.

God, please not that. She wasn't supposed to know much about what her dad did at his club, but she knew enough. People talked. And the whole BDSM thing kinda freaked her out.

Twisting from his light hold on her neck, she rose, and knelt up on the chair. Her lips curled into a provocative smile. "I never get on my knees before a nice steak dinner, big boy."

His brow lifted slightly. Then he smiled. "Steak sounds like an excellent idea. I will take you out to dinner after the photo shoot."

She pursed her lips. "Are you asking me out?"

"I don't believe I worded it as a question."

A sharp laugh escaped her and she shifted position to sit sideways on the chair. "That's just rude."

"Is it?" He folded his massive arms over his bare chest. "You made a proposition. I accepted. I do not see how that's rude."

Licking her lips, she let her gaze drift over his bulging pecs. His attitude made her feel reckless and she lifted her hand to touch his slick, lightly tanned flesh. "You think that was a proposition? I'll show you—"

He caught her wrist. "No."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"There is no hurry, *mi cielo*. If you do not want to be on your knees for the photo shoot, we can try something else." He moved away from her as the door inched opened with a hesitate tap. "We are ready, Chantelle."

Jami stood and straightened her skirt. Chewing on her bottom lip as the tall, pinched face woman clucked her tongue at Sebastian and applied more oil to his flesh, she tried to figure out what to do with the man. She knew what she *wanted* to do with him, hell, her panties were already uncomfortably damp. And playing hard to get was not working for her. Apparently, it wasn't even necessary. *He'd* already decided to set the pace.

And you're going to let him? Yeah right. She hid a smirk behind her hand and quickly schooled her features as Chantelle approached.

"Mr. Ramos tells me you're not comfortable with the initial set up. I want this to look as natural and . . ." Chantelle's thin lips pressed together. "Sexy, as possible. So here's my

suggestion. Mr. Ramos will pose by the window and you will take whatever stance works for you. We already have one set with the redhead that is rather sensual, but it's missing something. I think you have just what I'm looking for."

The woman seemed so stiff, like a teacher she'd had in high school who went on and on about how girls were 'proper' and 'refined' a century ago, moaning about how girls today were crass and had no values. But unlike the teacher, Chantelle didn't look at her like she was some punk. She looked at her with an artist's eye, making Jami feel like she wasn't a freak. Like she was . . . well, at least interesting.

Sebastian looked at her like that too. But his steady regard, even now, was somehow both carnal and reserved. Damn confusing.

Jami nodded at Chantelle, thinking about the pictures with the redhead—probably Amy. "So just do what feels natural?"

Chantelle nodded and pointed at Sebastian, then at one of the large windows near the back of the room. "Over there, hands on your hips. We'll try a few shots and I'll tell you if I want you to change your posture. For now, I'd like to see you as almost aloof. If you can manage it."

Giving the photographer a curt nod, Sebastian took his place. Hands on his hips, strong, sharply angled jaw held high, like a Spanish conquistador standing over his vast holdings. He followed instructions well for such a dominant man. Jami smothered a giggle with her hand and caught a wink from Chantelle.

"Go ahead," the woman said.

A few quick steps brought her right in front of him. His size—fuck, he was so much bigger than her!—made her pause for a second before she splayed her hand over his chest, sliding her palm over his slick flesh, exploring the hard slopes of muscles as she'd wanted to since she'd first laid eye on him months ago in that magazine.

His eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't move.

She took a deep breath and eased her body against his, one knee bent over his thighs, her arm around his waist, her hand gliding down until it rested right over his simple, silver belt buckle. As she gazed up at him, her lips parting at the warning in his eyes. She'd gone too far.

"Try not to look so mean, Mr. Ramos. You have an adoring woman clinging to you, doing exactly what every woman who sees this picture would *love* to do. There we go." Chantelle picked up her camera as Sebastian's expression softened. Almost tender, except for his eyes

which darkened with lust. A flash. Then another. "Perfect! Now, Jami, press against him so he can feel every inch of you. You've taken a seductive pose. Own it."

Jami nodded and wet her bottom lip with her tongue. She let her fingers slip just under the waist of his jeans, curved her other hand over his side. Her lips hovered close to his chest as she continued to stare up at him.

His stomach muscles tensed and his jaw ticked.

Chantelle didn't see it. More flashing and murmured approval. From a distance, then up so close purple dots spotted Jami's vision.

"All right, we're done!" Chantelle sounded exhausted, and relieved. "I must say, I'm happy there's so much chemistry between you two. The redhead sitting on his lap was a disaster. It was obvious he wanted to dump her on the floor—"

Laughing, Jami dropped her hands to her sides and gave Sebastian some space. "Did you?"

"I may have considered it." Sebastian went to the sole table in the room and grabbed the plain, white dress shirt he'd abandoned earlier. He pulled it on and turned to Chantelle. "So you are finished with us?"

"Yes." Chantelle put her camera in its case and waved them on. "Enjoy your night."

Jami left the room ahead of Sebastian, not sure why she suddenly felt nervous. She spun around, walking backwards, watching him, trying to figure out whether or not her teasing had pissed him off. But he was unreadable. They rode down on the elevator in silence. She made it to her car, ready to give up on him, when he came up behind her.

He held the door to her classic, pale blue Beetle shut and spoke softly. "Where do you think you're going?"

She couldn't help but squeak a little as she turned to face him. "Home?"

"Oh no, pet. You suggested dinner." His smooth, alluring tone dropped to a growl. "I'm hungry. Aren't you?"

Suddenly, she was starving. But they weren't talking about food, were they? She certainly hoped not anyway. "Yes, I am."

"Good. Then come with me." He took her hand, glancing back when she hesitated. "You haven't decided to play shy with me now, have you?"

"I never play at anything." She jerked free, hating the way she half wanted to follow him around like a little puppy and beg for whatever scraps of attention he felt like giving her. Even

her frown felt forced over the simpering smile trying to take its place. This wasn't like her. "I'm pretty upfront. You good with that?"

He kept his hand out, palm up, and regarded her calmly as though to say 'are you done yet?'. But out loud he said. "Yes, Jami. I am 'good with that'. What confuses me is why you are so reluctant to let me hold your hand when you were so eager to touch me before."

"Because you weren't being grabby then." She took his hand and stepped up to his side. "You may take me to dinner now."

His eyes twinkled with amusement. "May I?"

She gave him a regal nod. "Yes you may."

He chuckled and led her to his car at the other end of the parking garage. She stopped, releasing his hand. And approached the car with a sense of reverent awe.

The Aston Martin One 77. A silver masterpiece in a modern tear shaped design, constructed to fly across the road with little resistance from the wind. Very few modern cars were this beautiful. This magnificent.

"This is impossible." She shook her head and scowled at him. "Do you know how much this car is worth?"

One brow arched, he inclined his head. "As a matter of fact, I do."

"The insurance alone must be insane!"

"Perhaps, to some." He stepped up to her side and watched her as she went back to drooling over his car. "But I've always wanted a Porsche."

Her jaw almost hit the pavement. "Are you retarded? This is an *Aston Martin!* You dump over a million dollars into a car and you don't even know what it is?"

"Of course I know what it is, mi cielo." He tapped under her chin and smiled when her jaw snapped shut. "I was curious to see if you were just admiring the pretty car. I'm pleased that you know enough to appreciate it."

Appreciate it? Fuck, I want to have its babies! She held her breath and inched closer to it. "You're crazy, but you've got damn good taste."

"Yes, I do." He put his hand on the small of her back and propelled her towards the passenger side. His breath flowing over the nape of her neck as he leaned around her to unlock the door made all the tiny hairs rise. "In cars and women."

"Then you should have hooked up with the redhead."

"I could have. Just as I could have bought a Porsche, but that wasn't what I wanted, mi cielo. I wanted a car with soul. I want a woman with spirit." He pressed a soft kiss on the back of her neck. "I want you."

* * * *

A jazz band played on the huge stage in the center of the classy restaurant as Sebastian led Jami to his regular table, close to the windows overlooking the harbor. Both the music and the view added a little something special to dining out, but he usually indulged in the alluring atmosphere, and fine cuisine, alone. There were other nice restaurants to bring the women who expected five star treatment because he was rich. He'd never wanted to ruin the experience for himself by bringing them here. But for some reason, he wasn't concerned about that happening with this woman.

His only concern was that she was too young to truly appreciate it. A girl who dyed her hair blue most likely listened to some kind of grunge music and didn't often—if ever—eat in places where knowing the right fork to use for shrimp or salad was required. This would have been a better choice for a later date, after she'd had a chance to dress up and prepare herself for the high class patrons who might judge her.

But he hadn't thought of that before bringing her. To him, she looked perfect. Fresh and so full of life. Nothing seemed to intimidate her, and he hoped this would be no different. He couldn't care less if she ate with her fingers and talked with her mouth full. This place was part of his lifestyle and he wanted to see her in it. Too soon for such crazy thoughts, but she intrigued him, drew him in. It would be better to lay it all out now than to wait until she burrowed herself deep inside him and he began changing things about himself he had no desire to change just to hold on to her.

If they weren't a good match, best to find out before it was too late. Perhaps he was setting them up for failure to protect himself.

He certainly hoped not.

After settling herself gracefully into the chair he pulled out for her, Jami shook out the pale pink napkin she took from beside her plate and laid it over her lap. "This is not what I expected when we talked about having steak."

Sebastian shrugged and made himself comfortable in the seat across from her. "I've never found another place that serves steak just the way I like it. You were very specific in what you wanted to eat. Au Port is the best."

"We'll see about that." She rested her forearms on the table and leaned forward. "My father is an excellent cook and he taught me well. I'm willing to bet I could fix you up a nice, juicy t-bone just as good, if not better, than they can."

He sat back and rubbed his jaw. "You surprise me, Jami. You do not seem like the type of woman who would cook for a man, but you would cook for me?"

"Mr. Ramos, I've made it pretty obvious that there are." She paused and her tongue swept slowly over her bottom lip as she looked him over. "A lot of things." The edge of her mouth crept up as her foot—shoeless for some reason—found its way between his thighs. "I'd like to do to you, for you, whatever." She studied his face as she massaged his hardening cock with her toes. A grin flashed across her face as he ground his teeth. She sat up straight and moved her foot. "But cooking for you? We'll have to work up to that."

"Jami." He reached across the table and took both her hands in his. His tone dropped to the dangerous low that made most subs tremble. "You will pay for every time you tease me. I suggest you consider that before you do it again."

"What, are you going to spank me?" She scoffed, even though she looked a bit nervous. "You're missing a little thing called consent. I'm not your sub. This is our first date. Save the threats."

'I'm not your sub.' Apparently, she thought she knew a little about the lifestyle. Kinky sex had become quite mainstream. One day soon he might teach her the difference.

Lifting her hands up to his lips, he kissed the back of each one, then smiled at her. "I believe in the punishment fitting the crime." He released her hands and straightened as the waiter came to take their order. "We will discuss this later. I take it you'd like to order for yourself?"

"Yes, thank you." Her demeanor changed completely as she spoke pleasantly to the waiter. "A t-bone steak, medium rare, with a salad, French dressing on the side. Bacon bits and sour cream on the potatoes, please. No chives. And sparkling water if you have it."

"Yes, ma'am." The young waiter seemed impressed by Jami's manners, and Sebastian couldn't blame him. At first glance, Jami came off as rebellious, and he had noticed she could be

objectionable, but not in a way that demanded attention. She wasn't 'sticking it to the man' with her appearance or her attitude. She was just being herself.

And herself could be both bold and timid, from what he'd seen already. No. Not timid. Submissive. He hadn't misread that, no matter how much she tried to hide it. But she caught her reactions to his natural dominance and masked it as quickly as she could. Many submissives struggled with their natures, and she wouldn't be the first one he'd eased into accepting it. However, he couldn't recall ever looking forward to the prospect quite so much.

He waited until they were served, until Jami took her first bite of steak, chewing into it with a little sigh of bliss, before he spoke. "You are aware that being a submissive doesn't make you weak?"

She finished chewing, swallowed, and nodded slowly. "Yeah, sure, I get that. But exploring that BDSM stuff doesn't interest me."

"I see." He filled his mouth with a chunk of juicy meat and leaned his forearms on the table as he studied her. "Are you under the impression that exploring would involve more pain than you can handle?"

Her fork dipped into her potatoes, came up almost empty, and jabbed her bottom lip. She blushed. "No. That's not it."

Very interesting. The pain didn't bother her—in fact, if her reactions were anything to go on, she would enjoy that part of play very much. She was already somewhat aware of how pain could be pleasurable then.

"Then what bothers you? Have you found the missionary position so thrilling you're unwilling to try anything else?"

"Has anyone ever told you you're really blunt?" She stabbed her potato, scooping out the white innards as though gutting it, glaring as though she'd like to gut *him*. "I pegged you for a Dom, okay, but I was kinda hoping you weren't a one trick wonder."

He froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. "A what?"

She leaned forward and spoke low. "Can you get hard without tying a woman down? Without a flogger in your hand? I've always wondered that about 'Doms'."

Chuckling as she shoveled some potatoes into her mouth, he reclined and rested one elbow behind him on the back of his chair. "Mi cielo, just watching you eat gets me hard."

"Really?" She sliced a piece of meat, brought it to her mouth, then tore into it with her teeth. Smirking at his wince, she set her fork down and spoke around the meat. "How about now?"

"That depends." He had to be quick to stay a step ahead of her. Thankfully, he hadn't touched his wine. And didn't plan to. He needed his wits about him. "How would you feel if I used my teeth on you? Not quite so viciously, but with enough pressure to hurt you, just a little."

Her fork clattered on her plate. Her lips moved soundlessly as she squirmed in her seat. "You're a bad, bad man, Mr. Ramos. My daddy warned me about men like you."

"Did he?" Sebastian calmly cut another piece of steak, then brought it to his lips. "Why do I get the impression you go after the very kind of man your father warned you away from? That if he told you to stay away from me, you'd find me irresistible?"

She shook her head and let out a sharp laugh. "Damn it, I already find you irresistible."

"And you consider me blunt? Where is your teasing now, Jami?"

"You told me I would pay for teasing you."

"I did. But I'm surprised you took heed to my warning, since you are not a sub and couldn't care less about punishments."

"I'm also not stupid. You don't turn it off, do you? Or maybe you can't. If you didn't think I was a sub, you wouldn't even be interested in me." She finished the last bite of her steak and sighed. "Listen, I don't mind things getting a little kinky. This isn't your average date. We both know exactly how this is going to end."

He frowned, set down his fork, and placed his hands beside his plate. "Do we?"

"Yes. So, the question is, your place or mine? Let's skip dessert, okay? One hot night and we can both move on. You can find the sweet sub you're looking for and I can"

The lost look on her face tugged at his heart. He took her hands in his, searching her face for a clue that would tell him how to proceed as he laced his fingers through hers. But he found nothing. So he proceeded, blindly. Carefully. "You can what, Jami? Please, don't think up another witty remark to throw me off. Why are you so determined to let me use you for one night and walk away?"

She tugged at her hands, but not hard, not like she really wanted to be free of him. "I didn't say that. I'm just clear on what you want."

"You have no idea what I want. Nor what you want, I think." He took in a slow, measured breath as she dropped her gaze to the table. "Shall we finish our meal and move to another topic? Something beyond 'the lifestyle'."

Nodding jerkily, she glanced up at him. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Do you like the music?"

She surprised him with a smile. "Oh, I love it. The saxophone most of all. I played a bit in high school, but I wasn't any good. The woman here is a bit stiff, like she's tired of playing the same stuff. When we first came in, and I heard the way she was playing, I almost wanted to make a request to see if it would loosen her up."

"What would you have requested?"

She didn't hesitate. "Baker Street by Gerry Rafferty."

"So why don't you? Go ask if they know it while I order us some dessert."

"But I said—"

"Jami." He dropped his tone, leveling his gaze with hers, firm enough to get through to her, but not enough to cause her to balk. "The night will not end as you expect it to. Let's enjoy it while it lasts."

Thrusting up from her chair, her chin jutted up, she gave him a curt nod, then strode to the stage. Her hands were fisted at her sides as she spoke to the drummer who'd stepped down for a drink. He moved in close to her, as though he couldn't hear her, but with the band on a break that obviously wasn't the case. Sebastian had to force himself to stay where he was and not join them to lay his claim on her. It was too soon. Much too soon.

His presence obviously wasn't necessary. Jami slid past the drummer when the female band member took interest in the conversation and spoke to the woman. She'd likely been very direct because the woman hugged her saxophone and drew up as though insulted. But by the time Jami was done, she looked determined. The song began as Jami returned to the table. And the woman was playing her heart out.

He'd never noticed how mundane the music had become until Jami had pointed it out. And the change was startling. Listening to the soulful rendition, it almost seemed a shame that the talented lady had settled for playing here rather than pursuing something bigger. He wondered if Jami's words would push her to do just that.

"Oh, I love this song." Jami speared the last of her potatoes, peel and all, from her plate before the waiter could take it away. After finishing the mouthful, she rested an elbow on the table and cupped her cheek in her palm. "I wish I had talent like that. I wish I could do . . . something worthwhile."

"You're auditioning to become an Ice Girl. Surely you believe your skills on the ice, or your dancing, is worthwhile?"

She shrugged. "I can skate. I've done figure skating and played hockey a bit. I'm good on the ice. But I can't dance. Not when someone's telling me how to move." She bit her bottom lip. "And I don't love it. Not like some of the girls do."

"Then what do you love?" He needed to know, needed her to tell him all her vitality, all her passion, wasn't going to waste. "What drives you?"

Her shoulders slumped. "Nothing. I have no idea what I want to do. I want to be an Ice Girl to show my dad I care about the game, even though I hate it."

She hated the game? Nothing she'd said so far shocked him, but this did. "Why do you hate it?"

"It's like . . . I don't know, maybe like a sibling that got all the attention? All my life, that's all my dad talked about. And I tried to get into it, but all I saw was my mom trying to get away because she couldn't compete—" She covered her face with her hands. "No, that's not true. My mother didn't want to settle down, with a kid or a husband. She wanted to travel and experience life without anything holding her back. Sometimes I'm afraid I'm just like her—"

Lips pressed together she glared at him as though she'd said too much and it was all his fault.

He chose not to react to the accusation in her eyes. To instead draw her out from a different angle. "Do you enjoy travelling?"

She made a face. "I hate travelling."

"Really?" He shook his head, for the first time certain he was starting to understand her. "With your reaction to the music, I figured you might have a cultural leaning, that perhaps I would take you to a museum for our next date—"

"You're assuming we'll *have* a next date?"

"—or a musical. *Wicked* will be playing in Halifax in a few weeks." Sebastian paused as the waiter laid out their deserts, two large pieces of chocolate cheesecake with two tall glasses of

frozen hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and tiny marshmallows. He thanked the waiter and grinned as Jami stared at the plate. "I hope you like chocolate."

Without answering, she brought a forkful of cake to her mouth, rolling her eyes with pleasure even as it crossed her lips. Licking the fork clean, she let out a little sigh. "Oh, you evil man. I can't resist chocolate. One look from you and I knew I was a goner, but now you're feeding me chocolate and offering to bring me to see *Wicked*—my favorite musical after *Cats* by the way. Damn, I'm done for. Take me any which way you want me."

Dios mio! His blood abandoned his brain as his dick swelled with it. Her offer nearly undid him. The way she devoured the desert, with the tip of her pink tongue sweeping over her lips, the way she sucked at the straw—he wanted to ask for the check and take her home. Ravish her all night—no, longer. Once he got her in his bed, he'd never let her leave.

But he wouldn't take her to his bed tonight. She would write him off as a one night stand if he didn't force them both to slow things down. He turned his focus to his plate, keeping his tone light as she questioned him about his career, showing a lot of interest for a girl who 'hated hockey'. She even remarked on his play during recent games, praising him on a goal and tearing apart a few sloppy plays. Her knowledge went beyond that of a fan.

"Does your father play hockey professionally?" He asked abruptly. Her knowledge of the Dartmouth Cobras in particular was beginning to concern him. What if her father was one of his teammates? Few were old enough to have a daughter her age, but it was possible.

"Umm, no. He's never played professionally."

Her response set off alarms in his head. He'd never played professionally, but he must be involved in some way if she didn't want to divulge anything else. There had been several scandals with the Dartmouth Cobras over the past year—the kind of drama he avoided to the best of his ability. He participated in charity work, like the team visit to the children's hospital Christmas day, and promotions, without question, but avoided gossip lest he somehow be drawn into the center of it.

He should ask her straight out who her father was, but he feared her response would end things between them before they'd even begun, and he wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

Across the table, she fidgeted, avoided looking at him, giving him even more cause to question her. Inhaling deep, he forced a smile. "Are you finished?"

"Yes. Unfortunately." She sighed, gazed longingly at her half eaten piece of cake, and slouched back, rubbing her stomach. "That was sinfully good. I'll have to come back here one day."

I'll have to' not 'We'll have to'. He ground his teeth as the waiter came over with the check, handing over his credit card and signing after adding a generous tip to the total. Jami sweetly asked if the rest of her cake could be packed to go and they waited as the waiter took her plate, returning moments later with a small pastry box tied with a pale pink ribbon.

Jami winked at the waiter. "I know what I'm having for breakfast."

The waiter looked enchanted with her, and lingered until Sebastian caught his eye. Then he cleared his throat and wished them a 'Pleasant evening'.

Sebastian stood and held out his hand. "I must take you out of here."

Laying her hand in his, she nodded, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glazed with desire. "Please do."

They made it to his car before she pulled away and hugged herself. As he reached for her, she held up her hand and shook her head.

"I have to tell you, Sebastian. It's not right if you don't know. You'll regret it later." She took a deep breath. "My father—"

"No." He silenced her with a kiss, pressing her up against the door of his car, savoring her lips, sweet chocolate and wine, tender and soft. He spoke with his lips a breath as from hers. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know. I don't care who he is."

She clung to his shirt, rising up on her tiptoes to kiss him before whispering. "You will."

* * * *

The wind picked up as they drove, slashing against the car as the rain burst from the black clouds above. What a crappy ending to an amazing night. Never in her life had a date turned out so well. Her main goal, which had been to get this big, hot guy in the sack, had wavered as the night progressed. He listened to her, showed interest in everything she said. He didn't go on and on about hockey like she'd thought he would. He didn't treat her like a kid. They shared similar interests—

All right already. He rocks. He's still not going to stick around when you tell him your dad is the Cobras' GM. Which she should do—would do . . . soon. Holding out wasn't even an option anymore.

He'll hate you if you let him fuck you, then he finds out . . .

Let him hate her. It wasn't as if this could last anyway.

"What has you thinking so hard, mi cielo?" He caught her eye with a sideways glance and put one hand on her bare knee. "You are very quiet."

"Sorry, I'm just deciding—" She pressed her eyes shut as his hand drifted up her thigh. "What are you doing?"

"I warned you that you would pay for teasing me." His fingers stroked, feather-light, down to her knee and back up again, just under the hem of her skirt. "You were saying?"

Sweet liquid heat spilled between her thighs. She crossed her legs and struggled to get her brain working again. "Yes. I was saying . . ." A soft touch just under her skirt made her insides clench and she moaned. "Oh, please stop! I can't think with you doing that."

He chuckled, eyes on the road, and left his hand half under her skirt. "I apologize. Go ahead."

Her legs unfolded. Parted slightly. She held her breath and fisted her hands by her sides, waiting for his hand to slip lower.

His hand didn't move, but his thumb stroked idly along her inner thigh. Little zings of pleasure caused her clit to swell out past her damp folds. Pressure from his fingers caused her insides to throb. She panted, wondering if she could actually come from just his hand on her leg.

The car stopped. His hand went away and a low, pleading sound escaped her. She stared at him.

He nodded towards the window. "You may need your car tomorrow."

My car? She shook her head and frowned at the darkness. Finally realized they were in the parking garage at the forum. Her tongue felt thick in her mouth, but she somehow managed to speak. "Are we going to your place?"

"No, mi cielo. You are going home."

"Home . . . with you?"

"No."

"But—"

He pressed his fingers over her lips. "Will you have coffee with me in a day or so? When I return from the game in Pittsburgh?"

She nodded. Then took hold of his wrist and pulled his hand down so she could speak. "But what about tonight?"

Gently twisting his wrist from her grasp, he leaned forward and cupped her cheek. "The night is over, but there will be many more."

"But there can't be. It can't be like that with us, Sebastian." She had to make him understand. Somehow, he'd managed to go this long without hearing about her, but, now that she was back, someone was bound to mention her. "Seriously, I wish it could, which is weird because I went into this with one thing in mind, but—"

His lips covered hers and his fingers raked into her hair, holding her in place as he claimed her mouth, giving her a taste of his strength with the bruising pressure. She melted into him, digging her fingers into his forearms as his tongue thrust into her mouth. He stole her strength, her willpower, with his kiss, letting out a warning growl when she scrambled for the slightest bit of control. Once she surrendered to him, he smiled against her lips and drew away.

"You cannot rush me, *mi cielo*, but your patience will be rewarded." He ran his thumb over her swollen bottom lip. "This is nothing compared to what I will do to you when you're ready for me."

"I'm ready for you now!"

"Are you? Are you ready for me to restrain you and take your body any way I please? Do you trust me that much after knowing me for less than a day?"

Yes! The crazy, reckless part of her screamed. But the rational part of her brain, the one she'd spent the last eight months strengthening so she wouldn't fall into the dangerous habits that had put her in the hospital after an overdose, took over. Letting him tie her up would be safer than sniffing coke, but it would be stupid to give him that kind of trust this soon.

Her eyes burned as she shook her head and reached for the door. This fucking sucked. Why did he have to be a Dom? If he wasn't, she would at least have tonight. But he couldn't enjoy himself without taking control and she wasn't ready to give it. She might never be ready.

And even if she was, even if she wanted to try, who she was would ruin any chance they had.

What if you're wrong?

There was only one way to find out. She stepped onto the pavement, slammed the door, and strode around to the driver's side. Leaning into the open window, she rested her forearms on the ledge and faced him.

"I might eventually be ready, but I have to tell you one thing first."

"Jami—"

"My name, Sebastian. Just my name."

He inclined his head.

"Jami Richter." She straightened and folded her arms over her chest. "Now you know. I don't expect you to call me. Or talk to me ever again."

Spinning around, she moved towards her car, a big fat lump of regret almost choking her. She fumbled with her keys, waiting for the sound of Sebastian driving away.

Instead she heard his car door open. And close. Heard his heavy footsteps coming up behind her. He took her keys and unlocked her door for her.

"Thank you." She whispered as she latched onto the door handle.

He put his hand over hers. Used the other to tip her chin up. Then he smiled. "I cannot call you if you don't give me your number, *mi cielo*."

She bit back a sob, feeling pathetic and weak for getting so worked up. Slumped against him, she let out a strangled laugh. "This isn't a very smart career move, Mr. Ramos."

"The next time you call me 'Mr. Ramos', I will spank you, *gatita*."

"Gatita?"

"Kitten."

"Ah." She sighed again. "Almost as bad as 'pet'. Whatever. Give me your number too. If you don't call me after all this I reserve the right to call *you* and give you shit."

He laughed and rubbed her back. "I'll keep that in mind."

They exchanged numbers and he held her for a bit longer as she tried to process everything. As if he knew she just wasn't ready to accept it. He didn't seem surprised when she grabbed hold of his shirt and gave him a hard look. "You really don't care?"

The edge of his lip crept up. "I really don't."

And damn it, she believed him.