

CHAPTER ONE

The hospital machines beeped as normal when Don drifted off to sleep, but that didn't comfort Miranda. She held his hand and struggled not to cry.

Once upon a time, not that long ago, his hand had held the strength of a man in his prime. Now, his thin body and fragile grip gave a stark testament to the devastation wrought by the cancer that infested his cells, slowly turning his body against itself but leaving his mind intact. Some days that made this worse; watching over him when she knew he knew what was happening.

Careful not to disturb the IV taped to his skin or to wake him, Miranda Hardwick stroked Don's arm, the tips of her fingers following the trail of blue veins that had once been prominent but which had by now mostly collapsed. His skin looked thin. His bones felt even thinner. He used to be so strong, but Don didn't have much longer now.

Miranda bent down. A Mistress of the Castle, a woman known to clients and co-workers alike as the strong and regal Housekeeper, she laid her cheek upon her friend's fingers and bid him a silent farewell. She managed to keep back the tears until she passed the nurses' station. As stately as she knew how, she walked out of the hospital and back to her car. Once she was there, however, fishing a tissue out of the glove box, she covered her face and wept. Don wanted release from his bodily weakness, but she couldn't bear to lose him, her oldest friend.

She cried for herself, not for him. Robbed of the dignity of taking care of his own bodily functions, he waited for release. Medication had long ago ceased to keep pace with his constant pain. If she wanted him alive, it was for her own sake and not his. It was selfishness, pure and simple. She was ashamed for not being a better friend than this.

Blowing her nose, Miranda ran her fingers through her long chestnut hair, tried to wipe away the worst of her smeared make-up, and drove herself back to the Castle.

"How is he?" asked Ben, one of the shack guards who stood sentry at the sole entrance to the Castle grounds. Just beyond this gate, the road forked, with one branch leading to the front Castle gates, where the shuttle buses dropped off new arrivals and picked up the departees. The

other branched to the right and led to the hidden employee parking lot, which was where she was heading.

"He's as fine as can be expected." She managed a slight smile.

"I'm going up with Jackson and Sam after work," he said, and shook his head. "It's not right."

Since when did life ever care about right?

As soon as he raised the blocking arm, Miranda turned right, following the winding road back through the curtain of trees. Her parking spot was waiting for her beneath the shade of two sprawling old walnuts. She took a moment to fix her make-up again. Even going in through Connie's kitchen, there would be no traversing these busy halls without passing hundreds of people, and she'd be damned if a single one of them saw her as anything other than Mrs. Hardwick, the elegant housekeeper who was nothing if not in absolute control.

Fishing a duffel bag with her uniform out of the backseat and locking her car, Miranda followed the cobblestone walk to the rear kitchen door. As much as she wished she could simply pass through the busy kitchen unnoticed, Cook Connie spotted her before the door swung shut behind her.

"Get the rolls out of the oven!" she ordered, breaking away from the assembly line of salad choppers. A woman with one speed—precision military forward march—she strode past two orderly rows of kitchen bitches and prep stations, on a collision course to meet up with Miranda halfway past the ovens. "Get the meat off those chickens. You two! You've been falling behind all day. If you think I haven't noticed it's because you're both fucking around, making your little goo-goo eyes back and forth, think again. Your cocks are mine come closing time. What are you laughing at, Goldie Locks? You think that's funny? Now you can join them. Not quite as funny now, is it? Hup, hup! Move it, bitches! I want dinner on those buffet lines in twenty minutes!" She didn't stop barking orders until she reached Miranda's side, and then her voice lowered to a gruff whisper. "How is he?"

Over the years, Miranda had learned to swallow her innate irritation at repeatedly answering the same questions over and over. When one worked at a place where the clientele and events changed daily, she had to expect that from the guests. From other staff members, not so much, but this was no ordinary situation.

"As good as can be expected," Miranda told her.

Connie grunted. "Jackson and Sam will head up after work. I can't stand hospitals, but I'm thinking of going with them."

"Are they planning to take the bus? The hospital only allows two people in to see him at a time. They know that, right?"

Connie's brown eyes narrowed. "Who else is coming?"

"Ben, at least."

The gruff cook thought about it. "I can take him."

She could, too. In fact, she could probably take Sam and Jackson as well. At the same time, and with one meaty arm tied behind her back.

"Get there as early as you can," Miranda advised. "He tires easily these days. And I think two of your kitchen bitches just snuck out for a smoke."

Connie snapped around. "Oh, the hell you say!" And off she went, snagging a cane off a rack of assorted implements located between the pots and pans and the pantry shelves. She headed straight for the rear door, leaving Miranda to make a grateful escape.

She slipped out of the kitchen into the Masters' private dining hall. No one was eating there, so Miranda used the privacy to change into her daily uniform. It was only a prim black dress and full apron down the front, but the head of Castle housekeeping did not require fancy costumes to keep the rest of the servants in line. Most days Miranda liked the severity of her uniform. Right now, as she ran her hands down the front, she found herself feeling too brittle for such an austere mask.

She should go back to work, but she felt too brittle for that, as well. Giving it less than a moment's thought, Miranda wadded her contemporary clothing into her duffel bag and went home. Call it a perk as an original cast member at one of the world's best BDSM fantasy resorts. She had hours and responsibilities, but she worked when she wanted. So long as she attended Orientation daily and the Little Maids didn't run amok (as if Grimsley would let them), Marshall let her be. She warranted extra leniency these days, with all her daily forays into town to visit Don. As one of the original six members who had taken out loans, funded construction on the Castle, and helped transform this barren farmland into a luxurious resort, Don had been the driving force that brought their mutual vision to life. But that had been back before cancer tethered him to an IV and ventilator.

If she thought about that now, she would cry again.

Making her way to the Domestics' wing, Miranda slipped from the public hall into a private staff stairwell and climbed to the third floor where employee apartments lined the corridor. As the first Mistress hired, she'd chosen the apartment tucked in the back, with a view of the 'Nobles' garden. It was late summer, so the clematis and hyssop were in full bloom. She'd left her windows open before she left this morning. From the moment she opened her door, the scent of the clematis greeted her.

Home. It wasn't much—little more than one thousand square feet. A breakfast bar separated the kitchen and living room, and the bathroom lay midway between that and the bedroom. Everyone who lived at the Castle had the same layout, but Miranda made hers special with wide window ledges, and shelves of plants and flowers that turned her apartment into the Castle's most secret garden haven.

Pausing in the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea, she slipped through a hanging forest of spider plants and ivy to sit at her computer desk. She tapped the monitor on, wiggled the mouse to bring her laptop out of sleep mode, and her heart leaped with the silly, irrational hope that she might find a certain someone online at this hour. Someone who could soothe the weariness in her heart.

She felt ridiculous. Ana5751 never came on before supper time and yet, Miranda couldn't help herself. She needed the pick-me-up of reading one of sassy Ana's online messages. Anyone in her thirties was too old for the nonsense of online crushes and long-distance relationships, but Miranda couldn't help it. She needed the distraction.

She logged in to *Heaven in Horticulture*, her retreat from BDSM. Skimming to the bottom of the screen, she read through the list of members online and there it was: Ana5751. With that, her day brightened.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, opening a private chat window and typing, *Good afternoon, my lovely. I didn't expect to see you on so soon!*

Unplugging the power cable from her laptop, Miranda took it to the couch. She curled up on her favorite side, right across from the open window where the afternoon breeze whispered across her face, bringing with it the scent of late-blooming flowers. Kicking off her shoes, she tucked her feet under her and balanced her laptop across a pillow on her thighs while she waited for a reply.

It wasn't long in coming. The message popped up along the bottom of the chat window. It was a perky pop, the way she imagined Ana would be in person. Perky. Sassy. She smiled.

I'm ignoring my chores. Shh! Don't tell anyone. ☺

"Bad girl," Miranda chuckled, nestling down among the cushions as she replied, *Naughty, naughty! Whatever am I to do with you?*

Send me some peace lily clippings? came the cheeky response.

"As if I would reward bad behavior with peace lilies," Miranda tsked, ready to engage in the light-hearted escape of bantering with Ana. *A sound spanking would do you more good.* Bare-bottomed, with her hands pinned together at the small of her back and her kicking legs scissored between Miranda's strong thighs... a lovely bloom of heat unfurled in the pit of Miranda's stomach.

Too bad this wasn't that kind of forum.