
Chapter 1

She could feel them watching her. Not really a surprise, since she was currently spread-eagled and mostly naked, with her bare breasts pressed against a giant x-shaped St. Andrew's cross that was positioned on a small dais in the main room of the club. People tended to stop and watch the show when anyone was on the cross, and the stage was positioned as a focal point so everyone could see.

Being the center of attention at the club didn't bother her anymore. She was used to it, but it did make her hyper-aware of every reaction, and deep down, there was a certain smugness in knowing that she was able to control how she responded to each stroke. There was more than a little pride there, and sometimes it pushed her to go further than she actually enjoyed when she knew she had an audience.

She didn't always want to play hard and rough; on some nights, she was happy with just enough heat and sting to make her float. A belt across her ass, a good paddling, or even being restrained in an uncomfortable position with tight ropes could fill her needs. But tonight, she was in the mood for the kind of heavy

play that the cross was built for, so it had only been a matter of finding a partner who had the skills. It hadn't taken her long to spot the new face in the crowd.

He was tall, a head taller than everyone around him, and handsome in an understated way. He was definitely not a sub or bottom—not with that aura of dominance he radiated. The arms he crossed over his chest had enough muscle to show where the shirt tightened around his biceps. His eyes skimmed lightly across the room, searching for something or someone. She decided that must be her and made a point of catching his attention.

The conversation had been short, just long enough to exchange the important details. He had a bag full of gear, and when she asked what he was carrying, he'd gestured for her to look for herself. It took exactly ten seconds to find the single-tail whip right on top, and after that, she lost interest in seeing what else he had. She held it out to him. "You any good with this?" she asked, and when the answer was a cruel grin spreading across his lips, she turned and started toward the unused cross, determined to claim the spot before anyone else did.

If it bothered him that she led the way, he didn't comment on it. If he had, she would have looked elsewhere for her fun. She stripped off her shirt and jeans next to it without hesitation, knowing no one would blink twice in a BDSM club where half the players were in some stage of undress.

She pressed against the cross with her back to him and waited as he tightened the cuffs around her wrists and ankles with the ease of someone who'd done it before. She wasn't risking much playing with a stranger, not in the club, but she was glad to see him checking to make sure they were loose enough for circulation but tight enough to hold her. It meant he had experience to go with the pretty toys.

He brushed her hair forward over her shoulder to leave her

back completely bare and leaned in. "How much can you handle?"

"Tonight? A lot. Don't go easy on me; I'm in the mood for something merciless," she said. She turned her head so he could see that she meant what she said. He managed an expression that was both delighted and ravenous at the same time, and with a laugh, he moved away.

The wood felt cool against the bare skin of her torso, and as she shivered, the cuffs restraining her arms over her head jangled softly. The first lash of leather came down, leaving a fiery stripe diagonally across her back, and she had cause to test their strength. The sudden biting sting made her jerk in surprise, and she probably would have stumbled backward and maybe fallen to the dirty floor if the cuffs hadn't held her in place, but they did their job and she was the perfect target for the next stroke to land a second later.

He wasn't using a light hand. There was no slow build; the new Dominant had taken her at her word when she'd told him she could take a lot. For just a second, she considered saying 'yellow' to slow him down a little—if only because the first two were already harder than the ending strokes for most of the newcomers to the club.

But Sam had a reputation for never using her safeword, and she wasn't about to blow it now just because someone had listened to her for once. The regulars knew, of course, that when she said she wanted merciless, she wasn't looking to be teased with light flicks that barely stung, but even most of them weren't willing to give her what she really wanted right out of the starting gate.

Oh, they'd work up to it eventually, but when she was in a mood like this, that slow build could be as aggravating as an itch she couldn't reach. She often had to grit her teeth to keep from being too much of a smart-ass at times like that. A little sass

might get her smacked harder, but too much and she'd insult a Top; that never went well. Either they'd walk away, or worse, they'd simply refuse to give you what you wanted at all and the slow, almost gentle, strokes would never lead to where she really needed them to go.

She craved pain sometimes, needed it like she needed air, and nothing made her pussy dripping wet faster than a strong dominant with a single-tail whip who knew how to use it. She wasn't going to wuss out and ask him to slow down just because he'd listened to her and went straight for the good stuff. A third and then a fourth blow came down with searing, but controlled, over-hand strikes, and her muscles shook with strain.

Damn, it felt like fire raining down on her naked skin and she fought the urge to yelp when the fifth one swung low and wrapped around her hips. The tip of the whip landed on the front of her thigh. She threw her head back, hissing through her teeth as a hard pulse of sexual desire began to throb low in her body. Her skin tightened and she could feel goosebumps rising everywhere.

She was so focused on her body that the sound of the whip cracking seemed distant, almost unconnected to the sensations rolling through her body. She was thoroughly grounded in the physical at the moment. The sultry air, just a little bit too warm from all the bodies filling the club, caught her attention as it brushed across her highly sensitive flesh and a shudder rolled down her spine.

The leather landed, crossing to wrap around from the other side, and the searing line dragged her attention there. Her back arched and then itched as sweat beaded and rolled down over the welts. It felt so good, so right, as it forced the real world away. Her hopes, her broken dreams, her memories of a childhood gone wrong—all of it had been weighing too heavily on her lately. That was what brought on these moods and was the

reason she needed something harsher, crueler than usual, because none of it mattered when she was under the lash.

Mom and Dad always fighting. Dad loving the perfect sister more, while he could never bother to find a kind word for her. Not even when she eagerly obeyed his every order and tried so hard to please him. He used that need for affection against her, making it a competition at times.

Then later, running away when she was a near-adult, after one screaming match too many, and ending up with a bad crowd who got her hooked on the super addictive altered reality mindscapes—they were all just bullet points of her life with no emotion attached.

Who cared? Not she, not while she had pain to ground her to the physical. The whip was too intense to let in all the negative thoughts that haunted her. A good session could turn her on in a way that nothing else could—but the arousal was just one small piece of what it gave her.

She'd found a new drug, better than altered reality. Pain was her Master, and through it, she could drive away all the demons that haunted her thoughts so she could surrender to the moment. She wasn't a submissive; fuck that shit. No one was going to boss her around and make her lick boots as she prostrated herself on the floor.

She was a pain slut. Just a masochist and that's all she wanted to be. She'd told more than one wanna-be Dominant to fuck right off when he'd tried to make it into something more.

She usually didn't play with the new guys for just that reason. They always assumed that the minute they smacked her ass, she was theirs to command, but she didn't play those games. She didn't come to the club to find the perfect Dominant to run her life like many of the submissive girls did. She came there to get her fix, and then she was out the door. Depending on how turned on she was, she *might* let one take her home, to his home *not* hers,

to work out all that sexual energy afterward, but that was as far as it went.

This guy, though...yeah, if he was looking for sex afterward, she'd spread her legs. The scene hadn't been going on more than ten minutes before she was dripping wet and she could feel an orgasm, the first of many she hoped, on the horizon. At first, the way he worked was predictable, a pattern that she could follow, and she usually knew what to expect next as he worked his way down her back and ass and then back up again without touching her legs.

The heaviest strokes were concentrated across the thick muscles of her shoulders and the full roundness of her ass—the places that could handle the force. For the more sensitive areas, he just let the tip of the whip lick her skin with a line of stinging fire. The sensations contrasted for an intense experience that kept her on edge—the sign of an experienced player.

He swung the whip with precision, but his skill went beyond that. If she didn't know better, she'd have sworn they were frequent play partners from the way he seemed to know her so well. The light stroking of his fingertips, oddly rough, across the welts just when the pain was getting overwhelming eased her away from the edge each time. And his fingernails scratching lightly across the hot lines on her skin were pure unadulterated pleasure.

At least she thought they were his fingernails until she realized they were far too sharp—some toy she hadn't seen, she supposed. The snap of leather followed by those points being dragged too slowly across the overly sensitized flesh was what finally sent her over the edge. She jerked and shuddered with a breathy "Fuuuuckkkk" that was exhaled like a long sigh.

He chose that moment to surprise her with a horizontal stripe across her thighs. The flesh there had been untouched, and the surprise of it, combined with the extra tender skin forced a yelp from her. She tensed, waiting for another, but instead, there

was his hand dragging something sharp across the thick welt he'd just left. It almost, almost, made her climax again.

Her body twitched and she moaned loud enough that she knew the watchers could hear it. His hand dropped away and she waited for the next flash of fire, but nothing happened. She turned her head and found him standing right there staring at her like she was a buffet and he hadn't eaten in a week.

"Why'd you stop?" she demanded. Her voice cracked and she swallowed to bring back the moisture to her dry mouth.

She wondered if he was going to answer her as the silence lengthened but then, "You want me to keep going? It will hurt more now." He didn't sound like he was opposed to continuing, just surprised that she wanted to, and she glared at him.

"Of course, I want more. Or did the orgasm imply I wasn't enjoying it?" she said sarcastically. She licked her lips and huffed dramatically. "Look, if you're tired already, could you ask someone to take over, because I plan on making this a long night."

She was prepared to goad him more if necessary, but apparently, she'd said what he wanted to hear because he gave her the most predatory smile she'd ever seen in her life—and that was saying something considering her past.

"I'm not tired, little girl, not even a little bit," he said. Suddenly, he was gathering up her shoulder-length blonde hair in his fist and using it to yank her head back so he could stare down into her pleasure-blown pupils as he leaned in close.

She thought he was going to kiss her and twisted away to avoid it. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't kiss me. I don't do romance, and I'm not interested in making out," she said.

"Your body says otherwise." He watched for her response with an intensity that made her feel like he'd know if she was lying.

"Yeah, I'm turned on. Pain is obviously a turn on, but kissing is something else." She gave him a firm look, wondering if he was about to break a club consent rule and kiss her anyway.

"That's fine. I'm not into romance either," he said with an amused lilt to his tone. "So, does that mean you want pain only? Are you limiting touch to non-sexual?" he asked.

There was something off about his voice and the way he spoke that kept catching her attention, but it was too hard to focus so she filed it away to think about later. She shook her head, wincing when the hair he still held pulled painfully. "No, sex is definitely a possibility as long as you know I'm not looking for a boyfriend or a Dom. Not here, though. It would have to be after—there's no sex allowed here," she said, just in case he wasn't aware of that. Local statutes didn't even allow full nudity, which was why she was wearing a tiny scrap of a thong and nothing else.

"I've read the rules, but there is a problem. I'm from out of town, so I don't have a place here," he said, leaving the unspoken question between them.

She sighed and muttered, "Of course," under her breath and then broke her own rule for the first time ever. "Okay, maybe we can go back to my place if—*if* things go well." It was just a little bit of blackmail to get what she wanted from him. If it made him anxious to give her exactly what she asked for, it would maybe be worth letting a stranger invade her privacy for one night. She just hoped she wouldn't regret it afterward. It was hard to get rid of a guy once he knew where she lived.

"We'll talk about it later then. For now, I'm going to enjoy causing you pain. It's not often I find someone who can soak up so much and still be aroused by it. But if this is going to be a long session, we might need to switch things around. Anything else you like besides whips?" he asked.

She laughed, a low, throaty chuckle that men seemed to love. "Everything. I love it all. Everything from over the knee spanking

to bullwhips—though you have to get checked out by dungeon spotters before you can use anything heavier than a single-tail in here. Why, what else did you bring with you?" she asked curiously. She wished now that she'd taken a couple minutes to investigate his bag more thoroughly instead of running off with the first implement she'd seen.

But oh, it had been worth it. She hadn't been so thoroughly whipped in a long time. Each welt seemed to throb with its own pulse, and it felt euphoric—but at the same time, she knew she wasn't even close to her limit for the night, especially since most of the heavier marks were concentrated on her shoulders.

"Oh, I have a whole bag of tricks. You look like you've had enough of the whip for now so, I—" He paused and looked around at the crowded room to see what else was available. "I think there's a spanking bench opening up."

She followed his glance to see a shirtless Dom, dressed in tight leather pants, helping his subby boy up. The sub looked woozy, but he had a goofy grin splashed across his face as the Dom cuddled him protectively. She struggled not to roll her eyes. It was cute, in a way, but it always drove her crazy when a Dom hovered over her like that after a scene.

She thought about it and realized her hands were getting cold from being cuffed over her head. That was always a problem with being restrained while standing up. She had no idea how long the whipping had gone on, but now that she was pulling out of the haze, she could feel the ache in her arms too, so it had probably been a while. "Yes, let's do that," she said, opening and closing her hands to bring back the circulation as he released her.

So far, there were no red flags, no warning signs with him—and she had a good nose for that sort of thing. He watched to make sure she was steady, keeping a hand there ready to catch her if she wobbled while she slipped her thigh-length shirt back on. Her jeans, she just slung over her arm and carried since she wouldn't be needing them.

As they approached, the club cleaning bots skittered into sight. They vaguely resembled metallic spiders as they clambered all over the furniture cleaning it quickly. They vanished as quickly as they'd appeared, leaving only a faint scent of rapidly dissipating disinfectant. She wrinkled her nose at the astringent smell as she paused to give the fake leather a second to dry fully.

He obviously had plenty of experience both with implements and with kinky furniture and it showed as he expertly settled her face-down on the spanking bench, shifting the braces on either side to the right height for her knees. He moved around to the front and looked at her questioningly as he tugged at the attached cuffs, but she shook her head. She wouldn't need to be cuffed for this.

He made some minute adjustments so that she was positioned the way he wanted her, and then he ran a hand up her back, sliding the shirt along with it to expose her ass. With nothing in his way, he went right to work bringing up a nice deep shade of rose on her skin. He proved to be an excellent spanker along with his other skills, and his broad palm bounced from cheek to cheek with precision.

It was actually kind of refreshing to be bent over and spanked for a change. It had been so long since she'd had a regular spanking. Once people knew you had a reputation for a high pain tolerance, they tended to jump right to other things. Everyone enjoyed putting on a show with a submissive who could take a whip and writhe with the mix of pleasure and pain, so casual low-key kinds of play tended to be left by the wayside. She settled down, ready to enjoy the change of pace—literally.

His hand slapped down across her bare ass at a nice steady pace that made her cheeks jiggle as they quickly heated. She appreciated him starting with his hand because that meant it would last longer, but it felt—different. His palm felt like it was prickling slightly when it moved across her skin. *Rough from working with his hands*, she thought, but decided she liked the sensation. It

added something special, especially when it stroked across the welts the whip had left—and she had a fair number of those across her ass.

She'd never understood why some people found a good hand spanking too childish for their taste. Spanking children had been outlawed since before she was born, and with the right spanker, it could hit all the high notes without leaving a girl too welted or bruised to continue playing. Nothing ticked her off more than having her playtime cut off early because a monitor decided she'd had enough, and spanking was a good way to get a longer experience without having to be gentle.

Plus—she'd always just enjoyed it. It was different from the whips with their sharp and sudden bite, but it could be just as devastating even if it took longer to get there. Her new play partner seemed to be enjoying the slow build, but again he'd taken her at her word, and he hadn't started off with the light, almost pointless, slaps that most Doms tended to begin with.

From the first smack, she'd known he was an expert at this too, and when his hand had cracked down with an especially hard snap that sent her rocking forward on the padded leather, she groaned and dragged a breath in through her teeth as she struggled to acclimate. She could take more, and would, but, whew, it was a shock to have someone actually give her what she wanted without repeated prodding.

For a man she'd only just met that night, he seemed to have an uncanny ability to know when to slow down, when to pause, and when to up the intensity until she was writhing and making inhuman noises as she fought to accept the pain, to swallow it down and make it part of herself. Every time she came close to calling a halt, she found he was already reacting and easing off so she could catch her breath.

And his hand felt so good when it caressed and kneaded her ass to soothe the sting between rounds. That strange roughness to his palm sent the most delicious sensations rolling over her body.

By the time the spanking was over, and it seemed to go on for ages, she was practically limp and boneless. She was so woozy, she could barely even think, but she could feel the goofy dazed smile on her face as he helped her off the spanking bench and held her steady until she was able to stand on her own.

"Had enough, girl, or should we continue? We've got plenty of time to keep playing," he said. He gave her a wicked smile, and suddenly she had an urge to cover it with her lips—which was a shock even in her hazy post-play blur.

She swallowed hard and licked her bottom lip as she considered her options. Her entire body was pulsing with need and what she wanted more than anything was to drag him back to her place for an all-night sex marathon, but...but she'd never played with someone so in-synch with her needs before, and if he was just passing through, this might be her only chance to experience that.

"How long are you going to be in town, uh, uh—" She stopped, a frown on her face, and he laughed.

"You've forgotten my name, haven't you?" he asked, sounding amused.

She tugged her shirt back down and leaned against the spanking horse as she tried not to look embarrassed. She remembered the brief introduction and exchange of names, but she'd been eager to get started and hadn't really been paying attention. Who knew she'd actually need to remember?

"I guess the endorphins must have pushed it out of my head," she suggested with a slight shrug of her shoulders. She'd forgotten more important things while under the influence of endorphins, so it was entirely plausible.

"It's Trev."

"I'm Samantha."

He laughed. "Yes, I remember. 'Samantha call me Sam'." Where most men would be looking at her body, especially since she was only half-dressed, he seemed intently interested in her

hair, and after a second, he reached out and tugged a handful of blonde strands playfully. "You were saying?"

The prompt reminded her of where she'd left off. "Oh, right. So how long are you in town, Trev?" She resisted the urge to let her head lean into his hand though she really loved having her hair pulled like that.

"Not sure. It depends on a few things. I'm hoping to stay at least a week, though," he said.

"Only a week, huh?" She rolled her bottom lip under with a thoughtful humming sound. She was tempted in two directions: stay and play more and *then* go back to her place, or just go back now. Either sounded enticing at the moment, and she was torn.

"Tell you what—how about if I get you something cool to drink and we can relax for a few minutes while you decide what you want to do?" he suggested, but even though it was phrased like a question, he had already taken her arm and settled her onto the nearest couch without giving her a chance to protest.

And normally, she would have because she didn't like being manhandled or pushed around, but somehow, she didn't think to complain until his back was to her as he strode purposefully away toward the bar and its selection of juices and soda. She shook her head, scolding herself for being so malleable. It was his voice. There was something almost hypnotic about his voice, she decided. The way it rose and fell so smoothly, was almost musical. Even with the slow cadence and the way he seemed to hesitate over a word now and then.

He returned a few minutes later with a cup full of cold juice, and she reached for it quickly. Half of it was gone in one gulp, but then she slowed and sipped the rest. It wouldn't do to have a full bladder if they were going to scene again—and she was still unsure about that. Her ass was throbbing pleasantly, but she could handle more if they stayed.

"Thanks," she said belatedly. She didn't usually encourage much aftercare, which for too many Tops seemed to include

cuddling and fussing at her like she was a child. It was all far too personal for her and she preferred to just sit alone until she got her bearings back, but she was always thirsty after a good scene.

He seemed to understand that she didn't want him pressed too close to her so when he took a seat on the couch next to her, he left room between them. Sprawled casually with his arm draped over the back, he seemed content to watch her drink the juice, and mercifully he didn't chatter inanely. She was liking him more every minute.

She relaxed as the silence stretched out, waiting until the cup was empty before she turned her head and gave him a curious once-over. And since he was looking at her, she decided to take the time to do the same for him now that she wasn't so distracted. Her first impression had been accurate; he was attractive enough, and she liked that he had some muscle but wasn't too bulky. Not the slightest hint of facial hair, though, which was a real shame with that strong jawline. Most men chose to get rid of it permanently these days, but she liked a little scruff on the jaw. His eyes were so dark, she could barely make out the pupils, and they seemed to be regarding her with such intensity that she felt like she was being appraised.

"Like what you see?" she asked finally. There was a hint of challenge there, though she wasn't annoyed so much as curious about what he'd say.

"You are attractive." He stopped there as one side of his mouth turned up in a smirk "But then you knew that. When you were fighting to accept the pain without begging me to stop, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. You were..." he paused, thinking, "...vulnerable and honest. There's a different person underneath the snapping, I think."

She frowned, tilting her head and squinting until her eyebrows almost met at the bridge of her nose. "Well, that's the weirdest compliment I've ever gotten but thanks—I think." She really wasn't sure what to make of him or what he'd said.

"When you're in pain, you open up and that kind of vulnerability is beautiful, but now you're rebuilding the wall around yourself. It's like watching someone get dressed. Interesting," he said with a shrug. He sounded like it was a small matter, but his expression hinted at so much more.

She felt like she almost grasped what he was saying, though she still wasn't sure she liked it much. Did it mean she was letting too much of herself show during play? After all, if you couldn't be vulnerable while tied up and whipped, exactly when *was* it okay? Maybe never, but she wasn't going to give up her one emotional outlet just because a stranger thought he was seeing deep inside of her. It was probably all some line anyway.

Part of the reason she enjoyed hardcore playing was because it did force her to trust. She was safe at the club. There were monitors, and one word would stop things. She'd never had that kind of security anywhere else in her life. If only she'd had a safe-word as a new adult, she'd have used it so many times. She'd been hurt, scarred, and when she was all used up, she'd been thrown away. Through all that, never once had there been some magical word to stop the pain—but there was now.

It was part of the thrill, feeling like she was in danger but in a safe environment. There weren't many ways to experience such radically different feelings at the same time, but here? Here, she could let all the primal emotions boil out and no one judged her.

And she didn't have to let her walls down, something she couldn't seem to manage deliberately anyway, because they were torn down. Broken and pulled apart one brick at a time, one lash or spank at a time, until—yes, he was probably right—until she was raw, and open, and vulnerable.

The people surging around them intent on their own activities now that her show was over—they chatted, and laughed, cried and begged, enjoying themselves, but none of them judged her for needing this. It was nice to feel a part of something, but at the same time, she knew she kept her distance. They were play-

mates, or compatriots in the land of sadomasochism, but not friends.

Not really. None of them had been to her residential quarters. She didn't call them to go out to dinner. They knew her by face and name, but that was about it. So how was it that this stranger thought he could look inside and see so much? There was probably no answer to that question, or to why she'd broken her personal rule and told him he could come back to her place afterward even though it was unlike her to be so impulsive.

She tried to look casual and less guarded as she leaned back and stretched her bare legs out in front of her. Her toenails sparkled and caught the light with the semi-permanent glitter stain she'd applied a few days before. She wiggled them to make them flash more and pretended that she was too busy looking at them to pay him any attention.

"Have you decided if you want to play again tonight?" he asked. He sounded amused, which wasn't her goal.

A flash of annoyance went through her and she decided to tease him a little. "I'm not sure. I mean, it was a nice spanking but not really a reason to stop playing. I've had harder." She very deliberately didn't look at him and her hair was just long enough to sweep forward when she tilted her head, covering the grin she didn't bother to hold back.

He barked a laugh full of amusement, and her head snapped up.

"What's so funny?" she demanded. Her eyes narrowed in irritation. Why wouldn't this guy react to anything right?

"If you wanted to be spanked harder, you could have just said so, Sam. I went for slow and easy to make sure you were up for more playing. Most..." There was another one of those odd pauses where he seemed to be choosing his next words carefully, and then he continued. "...most women appreciate that, and I didn't want to break you too early. After all, we have all night and you're welted from the whip too."

"What makes you think you're the one I want to do another round with?" she demanded. She didn't have to fake the haughty tone; it came naturally out of her annoyance.

He sat up quickly, the whole casual act tossed to the side like a piece of trash as his fingers tangled in her hair and tugged her head toward him. His words tickled as he growled into her ear softly, "Oh, I know, Sam. I can smell how much you want me. I know what you're trying to do, and it probably works on these idiots, but it won't work on me. I'm the one in control tonight." He let her go abruptly and she almost fell across his lap in surprise.

The breath had been knocked right out of her, figuratively. She had to fight back the needy whimper that filled her throat, refusing to let him know how much that display had excited her—and why? She wasn't a submissive; she was a masochist, and she usually hated that dominant posturing. But apparently, her body had forgotten because she was trembling, not with fear, but with desire.

It was a long moment before she realized her mouth was hanging open as she gaped at him. She couldn't muster up the words to even reply as he sat back looking pleased with himself and smiled.

"So? Staying or going?" he asked. "If it makes it easier to decide, I've got nothing planned for tomorrow night and I'm hoping you'll be back here to play."

She swallowed hard and managed, "going," in a hoarse voice. Her mouth might have been dry, but her panties were anything but, and as much as she wanted to play more—the need to quench that fire was too intense to ignore. Besides, she wanted to be in perfect shape for round two with her sadistic new friend. "Definitely ready to go now," she added as she got to her feet and turned toward the door.

He stood up and then leaned over to snag her jeans, tossing

them to her with a laugh. "Might want to get dressed first. It's chilly out there."

She caught them with one hand and dressed quickly without looking his way, so he couldn't see the embarrassed flush on her face. She actually had completely forgotten she wasn't wearing pants—which was his fault. He was making her too distracted; she was never like this and it annoyed her so much she headed straight for the door without looking back.

Outside, the cool air felt blissful in comparison to the overly warm club. The temperatures inside were set with nearly naked people in mind which meant it could get hot fairly quickly on crowded nights. She tipped her head back and sighed as she stared up into the inky blackness and enjoyed the fresh air.

She pointedly ignored him stopping right behind her. Petty maybe but she didn't want him to know how good he was at making her react. When she felt that he'd been shunned enough, she turned, giving him a casual look. "Do you want to follow me to my house in your SDV?"

He frowned, eyes narrowing as he gave her a puzzled look. "My...SDV?"

One eyebrow went up in surprise. "Your vehicle? I assume you have a Self-Driving one. I mean, ever since they banned manuals from the highways, no one uses them anymore." Well, only the really stubborn ones still used them anyway. She wouldn't be surprised to find out he was one of those who tried to avoid the new tech because he liked to be in control.

It was a fairly new changeover and some people still complained about it, but she hadn't minded. She hated to drive; it was such a waste of time when she could be doing other things as a passenger.

His expression cleared. "Oh, right. No, I don't have my own vehicle. I took a public car here."

"I hate public cars. They always smell funny from the sanitizer," she said, wrinkling her nose as she pointed her key fob

toward the parking lot across the street and clicked the retrieval button. Headlights flashed to life as her SDV backed smoothly out of its dock, and a few seconds later, it had coasted to a stop in front of them.

She reached for the front door and then hesitated, wondering if it would be rude to sit in front and leave him in back alone. She could count on one hand the number of times she'd had other people in her vehicle, and it had felt weird to sit up front each time. She made a fast course correction and opened the back door instead. "After you," she said with a gesture toward the inside.

Suddenly, she felt tense and awkward about everything. She almost couldn't believe she'd invited a stranger, or anyone really, home. It was starting to sink in that they'd be completely alone together. She was slowly realizing what a dangerous thing she was doing; even though she had the usual panic devices that everyone carried, those could be disabled. She couldn't back out now, or rather wouldn't, but it did make her nervous.

He had an odd look of interest on his face as he climbed in and slid to the far side to make room for her to settle in next to him. The small seat didn't leave much space between them and she found herself accidentally bumping him while she got comfortable. Her backside ached pleasantly as her weight settled directly onto the seat. It was still warm and tingly from the long spanking he'd given her. She was glad the effects were lasting—usually, they faded too quickly, but then he'd been very thorough with his work.

She was reminded of the whip lines on her back when she moved. That slight pulling and tugging of the welts would remain long after the sting of the spanking had vanished, but they were no longer throbbing as persistently as her ass was. Her back was made of tougher stuff she supposed.

She squirmed a little to test the soreness as she pulled the door shut saying, "Home, James," as the safety field engaged.

The vehicle immediately pulled away from the curb and headed toward her apartment by the most efficient route.

"James?" he asked curiously.

She shrugged. "Well, it was programmed to respond to the model number, but it seemed rude to call it that."

"But why James?"

"Oh, it's just an old joke. Chauffeurs always seemed to be called that in old vids and since it drives me around, it seemed appropriate." Everyone she knew named their SDV something, so why did she suddenly feel so silly about it? She gave him a look to make sure he wasn't going to tease her about personalizing a machine, but he just seemed honestly curious as he examined the interior.

"You act like you've never ridden in the backseat before," she said finally after watching him poke at the row of buttons one by one to see what they did.

"I haven't."

Well, come to think of it, she hadn't been in the backseat of a car in years herself. Not since she'd been a near-adult, and that was almost ten years ago. "I usually ride up front too, but it felt rude to leave you back here alone."

She shifted uncomfortably, leaning away from him with a sigh. Small talk always left her feeling stupid, and he wasn't the type to carry the conversation on his own. He barely nodded in response, still focused on the buttons and apparently unsatisfied until he tried each one, so she stopped trying and watched.

She kept her amusement under control until, finally, he accidentally turned on the music and jumped about a foot before hastily turning it off again. She couldn't hold back the laughter at his look of complete surprise.

He turned to her with a sheepish look on his face and then joined her in laughing. That seemed to ease the tension and he looked so adorably boyish in his embarrassment that the next thing she knew, she was pressing her lips to his in a sudden wildly

passionate kiss. It was redundant to hold back at this point, since she'd already invited him to her house and kissing was part of the sexual escapades she was expecting, but she hadn't planned to seduce him in the backseat.

She hadn't planned *any* of this really, and for the first time in a long while, she found herself acting on instinct alone. Maybe she could still let down those emotional walls outside of a scene, or maybe this was just a carryover from the club—either way, she went with it. Her hands moved up under his shirt, and her tongue slid against his as it explored his mouth. She was surprised to feel the soft brush of hair along his chin and realized he wasn't as smooth as she'd thought, when the slight roughness prickled against her cheek.

His teeth were another surprise, at least the canines. They felt sharper than normal and she wondered if he'd had them modded. Fads went in and out and she didn't keep up with them, but for a while, vampires had been back in fashion and more than one of her friends had gotten their teeth sharpened for the aesthetic.

The impressions hit her like fragments, his warm skin, the tight muscles of his back, the way he seemed to focus such intensity on devouring her mouth—and when the vehicle came to a stop at her residence and the light came on overhead, she pulled away from him with a sense of confusion that they had arrived so quickly. It took her a second to pull herself together and she hoped he couldn't tell how flustered she was as she climbed out.

"You live here?" he asked, tilting his head back to look up at the tall building.

She straightened her rumpled shirt and nodded. "Mhm. Level seventeen." The car was sent to its dock with a push of a button and she headed toward the nearest door of the complex. "It's just a standard residence, but it's not a bad building and I have an actual view from one side," she explained proudly.

It wasn't easy to get an apartment on the outside row, most

people had to make do with picture screens, but for once, her luck had been good and she'd been chosen from the pool of applicants. She glanced over at him, expecting some kind of congratulatory comment but his neutral expression said he had no idea how special it was. She shrugged and led them to the lift. A minute or so later, she was showing him into her apartment, and as soon as the door closed, she was slipping out of her clothes, while he—he seemed too captivated by the small space to notice.

Like most efficiencies, it was just one main room and then a bathroom. Not much to see really, and yet he was examining everything with interest. Touching things, like he'd done in the vehicle. It was so odd.

"Isn't the housing like this where you're from?" she asked in a bright curious tone that was as artificial as the overhead light. She felt her muscles tensing from worry. She'd broken her rules and invited him home without even knowing him, and now her biggest concern was that his odd behavior was a symptom of mental instability.

"No. No, we don't live in buildings like this," he said. "We're more spread out, with land."

Suddenly, it all became clear and she let out a breath of relief. "Ooooh! You're a Rustic!" She clapped her hands together, looking pleased. "I've never met one before. I've never really been out of the city before, to be honest." But of course, she'd heard of people who still lived in single dwellings out on their own with actual space between their homes. She'd even seen pictures of the houses, each surrounded by its own land, usually covered with the specially bred moss that had taken the place of old-fashioned lawns.

As a child, it had been a fun game to think about living in the wilds, and she'd often snuck off to the closest park dome to pretend. The thick, cushiony moss had made a comfortable bed to lie on—until she'd gotten caught ripping up chunks of it by a

proctor and was forced to listen to a long lecture about how important it was for the environment.

The moss was designed to create large amounts of oxygen and was making up for the increased population. She didn't know much about the mechanics of it—but after that day, she knew better than to damage it. Especially since it had earned her a three-month ban from the recreation areas and a stint of community service.

The experience had ended her interest in roughing it in nature, and now she couldn't imagine having all that space and only a few people sharing. It was enough to give her agoraphobia, but it explained every odd thing about him and made him all the more interesting.

A look of confusion crossed his face and then vanished almost as quickly as it appeared. "Ah, yes, I'm a Rustic. Not used to the city yet, but I'd like to do some exploring while I'm here. Maybe..." He paused, tilting his head in question. "...you can show me around tomorrow?"

That was a bit much for her introverted self, though the novelty of showing a Rustic around did appeal to her. While she wavered, wondering how to reply, he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

"We can talk about it later. Right now, we've got something else on the agenda. Don't we?" He stared into her eyes and the potency of it threatened to melt her to nothing.

"Oh yeah—things," she whispered in a breathless voice as she pressed against him and somehow, without actually noticing it, the rest of her clothes were gone and so were his. They tumbled into her bed and she landed on top, sprawled across his chest.

"You must work out a lot in the rurals," she said as she ran her hands over the hard muscles, exploring them with curious fingers.

He gave her an amused look as he grabbed a handful of her

hair and tugged her closer. "Do you really want to talk about that right now?"

She resisted the pull until it started to hurt and then relaxed and let him reel her in as she answered, "No, I'd rather do something else." She let the need pour into her voice until the words were almost a moan and then watched with delight as his body reacted instantly to the tone.