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# HIS BATTERED SUBMISSIVE

Restrained Fantasies - Book Three

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## Prologue

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Six months ago

**K**atlyn Harris sat across from her husband and contemplated murder.

It wasn't her fault some idiot driver had hit the power line running to their house. It wasn't her fault the temperature was hovering near freezing. It wasn't her fault it was February and the cold had forced them to get a hotel room to keep from freezing. And it most *certainly* wasn't her fault they were in this stupid restaurant for a meal they couldn't afford.

She'd offered to put something together in the hotel. The room had had a microwave. She could have made something decent for dinner, but Jeff hadn't wanted, as he'd said, "some shitty slop from the goddamn microwave". Then, to drive his point home, he'd slapped her and asked if she was trying to poison him. So yeah, murder sounded better every day.

Her life would be so much better if he were dead. Even if she went to prison for killing him, it would be better than living another day as Jeff Harris' punching bag, but she wasn't brave enough to leave him again.

Now, they were in this steakhouse, and he was complaining about prices. She'd done her best to keep their cost down. She'd ordered iced water and a paltry side salad. He was the one who'd ordered a steak, a loaded baked potato, chocolate lava cake, and *three* beers. He'd stuffed his stupid face while she'd been starving! He hadn't even let her have one of the free yeast rolls, just told the server to bring out two with his meal.

A man stepped to the side of the table, his back to her. "Congratulations, sir! I'm pleased to inform you that you're our one-hundredth customer this month, and that means a free dinner for you and your guest."

"No crap?" Jeff's eyebrows drew together, and his lips turned upward. He was skeptical but excited.

*Please, god, let it be true, anything to lift his mood before we leave,* she prayed, even though she wasn't sure she believed in gods anymore. She'd been on the receiving end of Jeff's fists too many times to think anyone watched out for her.

"Absolutely!" the other man continued, voice bubbling with excitement. "As part of your good fortune, we're also throwing in a one-hundred-dollar gift card. If you'd please come with me, we can take care of those pesky details, a little "i" dotting and "t" crossing. Corporate policies and all that. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course." Jeff turned to her, and the smile on his face slithered away. Anger flashed in eyes the same fiery color as his hair. "Don't go anywhere."

"I won't," she said softly. As if she'd try to leave again. She'd learned that lesson the hard way. *Three* times. The last time she'd tried to leave, he'd tracked her down, and his fists had made a compelling argument as to why she should never do that again.

The moment Jeff and the other man turned a corner and vanished out of sight, she closed her eyes and released the breath she always seemed to be holding. He was gone, and although it would only be for a moment, she would relish every second. She

had so little time away from him, so when she had it? Pure ecstasy.

Maybe he would leave for another business trip soon. That would be heaven, even if she had no clue what kind of business trips plumbers went on, but she didn't care. The two-day trip he'd taken to Las Vegas last weekend had been incredible. The bastard had locked her in the basement before leaving, but she'd had food, warmth, a place to sleep, and best of all, forty-eight hours where she hadn't been afraid of being hit.

The scrape of a chair leg over the painted concrete floor had her snapping to attention. If Jeff saw her seated so un-womanly, there'd be hell to pay, but the man folding his tall, lean frame into the chair he'd pulled beside the table wasn't her husband.

Black slacks covered the man's long legs, the perfect accompaniment to his long-sleeved, light gray button-down. His tie was the same color as his pants, but he'd left his collar open. He looked like a man nearing the end of a long day. He might be a little on the rumpled side, but he was still sexy as hell, which was reason enough to get rid of him as quickly as humanly possible.

She opened her mouth to ask him to leave, but the glint of the silver badge clipped to his hip caught her attention. Oh, no. Oh, god. He was a cop! She didn't think she'd ever been more terrified. If Jeff came back and saw her with the police, the beating tonight would be beyond terrible.

"I'm Detective Maddox Westbrook," he said softly. "I'm with the Dallas Police Department's Domestic Abuse Division, and I want to help you."

Domestic abuse? No. *No*. No, no, no.

"You can't be here," she whispered fiercely. "My husband—"

"Hurts you, and you're terrified of him, especially terrified he might see you with a cop."

*Lie*. It was her knee-jerk reaction. *Lie and get away*. She'd learned the routine years ago. Deny everything until the cop left her alone in hell.

"Of course, he doesn't hurt me," she said, hoping against hope she could relay the coolness and absurdity needed to convince him to leave. "He's just had a difficult day at work, and there's this thing with our house. See, some idiot hit a power line, and we have to stay in a motel and—"

She stopped, the rest of the lie dying in her throat. Detective Westbrook hadn't interrupted her rambling response. He sat quietly and listened, his gray-blue eyes kind but unconvinced. She waited for him to say just that, to call out her lie for the bull shit it was, but he surprised her.

"You don't deserve to be treated the way I've seen him treat you tonight," he said gently, "and if you let me, I'd like to help you."

A sob welled up in the back of her throat, but she swallowed it. She wouldn't cry—*couldn't* cry—not in the middle of the restaurant with Jeff nearby. It was just that she hadn't expected kindness. The detective's words were the first raindrops her dry soul had experienced in far longer than she could remember.

He turned suddenly, took the basket of rolls a server held toward him—not the server who'd waited on her and Jeff—and placed them in front of her. "Eat," the detective instructed. "There's no way you're content with the measly side salad and glass of water you ordered, but I understand why you ordered what you did."

She could try conjuring a new, *better* lie, but the rolls were right there, all golden and tempting. And they smelled *sooo* good. And god, she was so, so, *so* hungry. He'd even made sure the server brought butter and honey and—

*Oh, screw it.*

She snatched a roll like the starving woman she was. The bread was hot and fresh from the oven. She didn't waste time using a knife; she ripped a piece off, dipped it into the butter, and plopped it into her mouth.

*God.*

She shoved in another piece. Hell, she inhaled the unexpected gift, and she didn't give the slightest damn if anyone saw her—at least, anyone who wasn't Jeff.

Her gaze shot in the direction he'd disappeared, but he wasn't there.

"Don't worry, your husband's with my partner," the detective said. "I'll know the second he's on his way back."

The man who'd come to the table, was he the detective's partner? She gave the question fair odds. If so, then that meant the pair had worked together with the restaurant to arrange this moment alone with her. Which meant, Jeff couldn't see her, and she instantly relaxed. She realized her mistake one moment too late. No way the detective missed her instant relief. None whatsoever. A man who knew her food and drink order, knew her situation without knowing her, wouldn't miss something so obvious.

She popped another piece of bread into her mouth and swallowed. "Why'd I do it then, order what I did?"

"So, hopefully, he wouldn't complain that you'd ordered too much and run up the bill, only it won't matter. If not this, he'll find something else to complain about. Abusers always do."

She didn't confirm or deny, but he'd hit the nail squarely on the head.

He pulled a receipt from his pocket and placed it on the table. "I don't give out business cards to people living with abusers. I don't want anything that even hints cop, so I've made arrangements with the owner of this bakery. When you're ready, call the number on the bottom of this receipt and ask for the Blue Star Special, and they'll forward the call to me."

She didn't reach for the receipt, but she didn't push it away either.

"If your husband finds this, tell him you won a raffle or clipped a coupon for free cookies from the newspaper. If that happens, all you have to do is go into the shop and ask for the



Blue Star Special you ordered, and you'll receive a box of twelve star-shaped cookies. No questions asked. No cost to you."

She stared at the receipt, something shifting and breaking inside her. She realized with terror what was cracking: hopelessness. Was escape possible? She couldn't let herself believe it, but, but, but...

She looked long and hard at the detective, his blue-gray eyes still glued on her, kind and patient. Something about the way he looked at her hammered another crack into that part of her breaking apart. He made her want to believe that freedom from Jeff might be possible, but more than that, she found herself wanting to trust Detective Maddox Westbrook.

"You don't deserve to be treated the way he treats you," he said again, softer than before, as if knowing she needed to hear it again. "And if you let me, I'd like to help you."

She leaned forward and whispered something she'd never told another living soul. "If I try to leave again, he said he'd kill me."

His all-seeing eyes went hot and then steeled into resolve. "Not on my watch."

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## Chapter 1

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Present day

"**W**hat the fuck do you mean I'm off the case?"  
Detective Maddox Westbrook shot to his feet and toppled the black visitor's chair in his captain's office. No way. No fucking way. He absolutely would *not* abandon her—no way on god's green earth would he walk away. So long as he had breath in his body, he would never stop looking for Katlyn Harris.

Maddox stared down his captain. Gerald Atkins had been Maddox's commanding officer for five years. A stern man in looks and demeanor, Atkins had been a solid cop before making his transition to captain of the Dallas Police Department's Domestic Abuse Division. Once upon a time, they'd been partners, too. Maddox had never once resented the fact his one-time friend was his boss.

Until now.

"I'm not walking away from her, Captain." Maddox's resolute words echoed off the pale-gray cinderblock walls. "I gave her my word when I rescued her from that shitbag that I'd protect her."

"And you did everything you could to keep your word," Atkins said. "You worked with Warriors for Women to help relocate her. The fact Mrs. Harris went missing *after* she'd been transferred into *their* custody isn't on you."

"Like hell it isn't on me!" He'd set every damn one of these dominos tumbling.

Starting with their meeting in the restaurant and culminating in her abduction, he'd played a crucial role in everything. He even had the death of the Warriors for Women operative assigned to guard her on his conscience. Maddox owned it *all*, and because he owned it, he'd do whatever it took to make amends. Whatever it took, he'd get Kat back—alive hopefully.

"You can't pull me off this case. Kat wouldn't be missing if Carter and I didn't spot her in that restaurant." Maddox pointed at his current partner, Detective Carter Burkes, who sat in the chair to Maddox's right. "We owe her."

"I understand that," Atkins said, "which is why I let you pursue the case long after we lost jurisdiction. Jeff Harris' crimes have crossed multiple state lines. As such, Katlyn Harris belongs to the FBI now."

"Fuck the fucking FBI!" Maddox spun away and stalked as far from Atkins as he could manage, which wasn't far given the box of an office. The feds didn't give a flying fuck about Kat, not the way he and Carter did, even if the fucks they gave weren't the same.

Carter wasn't the one who'd fallen in love with Kat, but he understood the hell Maddox had lived through the past month. Like him, Carter had once fallen for a woman he'd helped liberate from an abusive situation, but unlike Maddox, Carter had forever lost the woman he'd loved when her ex had had her killed. At least, Maddox prayed they didn't have that in common.

"We have a new lead, Captain," Carter interjected, sensing Maddox on the verge of doing or saying something he couldn't

take back. "If you'll hear us out, I think you'll agree a little more time is warranted."

Atkins sighed. "Show me what you've got."

Maddox turned as Carter pushed from his seat and placed a black folder on their captain's desk. When he and Carter worked cases, they used color-coded files, and only the *direst* cases went into black folders. Kat's case was as desperate as they came.

"After Katlyn went missing," said Carter, "we stayed in close contact with Detective Palmer to rundown any property in Jeff Harris' name or in his family's name. *Any* place he might have conceivably taken Katlyn."

Detective Emily Palmer had been the lead investigator for Katlyn's abduction. She was a keen cop who knew how to use every tool in her toolkit, even if that included two cops outside their jurisdiction. She hadn't given a fuck about jurisdictional games, not when a woman's life hung in the balance.

Maddox took the metaphorical ball from his partner. "We cleared every piece of property we could find and got nothing. We figured Harris must have found someplace without a connection to him, but then last night, the three of us were sharing an after-dinner drink and—"

"Three of us?" asked Atkins.

"Raven, Carter, and I," answered Maddox.

"Oh." Atkins' gaze flicked to Carter, and although brief, a hint of envy reddened the man's cheeks.

Raven Malek was Carter's other half in every way that mattered: girlfriend, soulmate, and submissive. She was also one of Maddox's closest friends, both before and after she and Carter had hooked up. A couple days ago, she'd surprised Carter by bringing him lunch at the precinct, and well, with her violet-streaked black hair, incredible artwork of body tattoos, and curvy figure, she wasn't the type of girl anyone forgot. Carter was still the envy of the department.

"Anyway, thanks to something Raven said," Maddox contin-

ued, "we started calling rural police forces and asking if any of the locals had any extremely remote hunting lodges for rent, especially ones off the grid. We prioritized our search by extending outward from the original crime scene in Oregon in a circular pattern, and we got a hit."

"Where?" Atkins asked.

"This tiny hunting cabin outside Troy, Montana." Maddox tapped the black and white printout of the two-room hunting cabin Troy's chief of police had emailed. "According to the specks, the place has no running water and only a wood-burning fireplace for heat. It's not much more than a glorified tent, but I want to check it out."

Atkins picked up the photo. "And you think Harris took Katlyn here?"

Maddox nodded—then shrugged. "The police chief said a Jay Johnson is currently renting the place. The man supposedly checked in alone, but we all know how easy it would be for Harris to sneak Kat in unseen."

The fucker had been keeping her unseen for a month already, hadn't he?

Atkins returned the photo to the file. "And why do you think Johnson is your guy?"

"Johnson is Harris' maternal grandfather, and Jay is the phonetic sound of the first letter of Jeff. It's not a deep ruse, but Harris isn't deep so..." Maddox shrugged.

Atkins scrubbed at his jaw. Oh, Maddox knew that look. His former partner was wavering but unconvinced.

"It's a promising lead." Atkins lifted his gaze to Maddox, and Maddox felt the kick to his gut before "but" left his captain's lips. "But it's still not your lead to follow up. Forward this to either Agent Logan or Andrei. It's *their* case. You've got a full caseload as it is, and I cannot press this enough: she's not your responsibility anymore. Trust the FBI to follow through and—"

"No." The refusal was out before Maddox had realized it had

formed, but he didn't regret it. "I'm not passing this on. I owe it to Kat to do everything I can to find her."

Captain Atkins pushed to his feet, rising so he and Maddox stood nearly eye to eye. "You are to pass this information on and then forget about it. You've done everything you could for Mrs. Harris. Sometimes, as cops, we can do everything right, but the situation still ends bloody. We know that more than most, the three of us."

Maddox didn't back down. He was a tall man, so he had several inches on his captain, but the captain had a good twenty pounds of solid muscle on Maddox. If this came to blows, neither would walk away without getting bloody.

"I can't let this go," Maddox said. "And I won't."

Atkins closed his eyes, his fingers flexing rhythmically in a habit Maddox recognized; his captain was reining in his temper. "I know perfectly well why you won't let this case go, Maddox."

The accusation hung in the air, but Maddox didn't deny it. Atkins was too good a cop to miss something so obvious. Maddox hadn't intended to fall for Kat, but sometimes, you just fell for someone you had no business falling for. He'd been a goner the moment she'd leaned toward him in that restaurant and whispered, *'If I try to leave again, he said he'd kill me.'*

The hope that had sparked and bloomed in her eyes as he'd promised to help her and keep her safe haunted him. She'd been so brave. She'd left Harris, but then, Maddox had failed her.

Maddox pulled his shoulders back and stretched to every inch of his height. "I will *not* abandon her."

In his peripheral vision, Maddox noticed his partner flinch.

"Goddamn it, Maddox. I didn't want to do this, but you've left me no choice." The captain's fingers were flexing again, harder and with increasing speed. "Forward the information and move on, or when you leave my office, you'll be doing it without your badge and weapon. Do I make myself crystal, fucking clear, Westbrook?"

Maddox stiffened. His captain didn't refer to him by his last name unless they were in public, or he was not-so-subtly reminding Maddox of the current power dynamic between them. In other words, Atkins was the boss, and Maddox needed to come to heel.

Yeah, well, fuck that.

Maddox reached for the shield clipped to his belt, but Carter captured Maddox's wrist.

"Don't," his partner whispered, the word hard. "She wouldn't want this, and you know it."

"If this was Emily, would you back down?"

"Yes," Carter said without hesitation, but they both knew he was lying, which was why Maddox knew he'd rot in hell for what he said next.

"Then you should be glad she died before she found out what an asshole you are."

Without waiting for a response or for his consciousness to kick in, Maddox slammed his shield and his sidearm on his captain's desk and walked out.

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The next flight to Montana left at zero-five-thirty, and he planned to be on it.

Maddox yanked his travel bag from his closet and tossed it on the bed. He wanted to get the packing finished so he could use the next twelve-ish hours to work Kat's case. His and Carter's new lead might be promising, but Maddox had been a cop long enough to know putting all his eggs in one basket was a recipe for failure.

His hand froze in the middle of shoving socks into the bag, realization punching him. He wasn't a cop anymore. In a moment of anger, he'd turned in his badge and sidearm. When he'd rolled out of bed that morning, he hadn't seen that one

coming. Being a cop was who he was. He didn't know how *not* to be one. He'd wanted to be a cop since he'd sat in the audience at his father's trial, to protect and serve, to be the cop his father had never been, and for fifteen years, he'd done just that.

But then, Kat had happened.

He had to find her, and if turning in his badge was the price he had to pay, then so fucking be it. Once he got her back—and he had to keep telling himself he *would* get her back—he could seek out other precincts. One of the wealthiest men in the world, and a fellow Dom, had previously approached Maddox about heading up his fiancée's security detail, so Maddox could look into that option. Or he could try his hand at private investigation. They weren't what he wanted, but he'd figure something out. Once he found Kat.

When he'd finished packing, he went to his home office and examined Kat's case-board. He'd expanded on it until it covered nearly one wall. He usually had his board divided into multiple sections, one for each active case, but now, every section belonged to Kat. Every lead that had fizzled out, every person they'd interviewed, every rabbit hole they'd gone down, all the details were here, a testament to his determination *and* his failure.

He pulled out the blue pushpin securing his favorite picture of Kat to the corkboard. He loved this one; it was the only one he had of her smiling, standing in stark contrast to the rest of them. Every other image showed her battered and bruised, but not this one.

He teased a fingertip over her cheek. He'd snapped this picture one beautiful April afternoon when he'd been shadowing her and Harris. They were in a Kroger parking lot. She'd stepped from the passenger's seat as a hummingbird flittered past. The tiny creature circled her like a scene from a fairytale. She'd spun as if trying to keep the hummingbird in view, grinning as she'd turned.

He'd wanted to go to her, to share the incredible moment



with her, to take her beautiful face in his hands and kiss her. At that moment, he realized he was in trouble. He couldn't say it was the moment he'd fallen in love with her, but it had been the moment he'd admitted, even if just to himself, he'd fallen in love with someone he had no business falling for.

*Bang, bang, bang.*

"Shit."

Maddox pinned the photo back into place and went to answer the door. Probably Carter. He owed Maddox an ass-kicking, but Maddox didn't have the heart or the time to deal with his partner. He would've left Carter to knock until his knuckles bled, but if Maddox didn't answer, Carter would simply let himself in with the key Maddox had given him years before.

Readying himself for the fight, he yanked the door open and froze, momentarily perplexed. A very gorgeous, very furious Raven Malek stood before him. She'd piled her black hair atop her head in a messy bun. A black tank top left her full sleeves of tattoos on display, and a delicate diamond piercing decorated her brow and another, her nose. As usual, ripped jeans and combat boots completed her look. She was an avenging angel, beautiful and deadly, and it didn't take a detective to deduce who she was here to avenge.

"First of all," she began, and without telegraphing the movement, she punched him square in the jaw.

Unbraced for the blow, Maddox stumbled two steps backward. He'd righted himself as Raven advanced on him, kicking the door closed behind her.

"How dare you fucking say that to Carter! You, of all people, know how Emily's death haunts him. It *still* twists him up inside, so for you to say that was the dickest of all dick things to say."

Yes, Maddox did know. He *was* a dick for saying it. He hadn't meant to, hadn't intended to, hadn't meant it even as the words had left his mouth. He'd been too pissed for rational thought.

He'd needed someone to lash out at, and his partner had been there. It wasn't an excuse, and it sure as fuck didn't make it okay.

"And second," Raven continued.

He braced for another punch.

Waited.

She wrapped her arms around him and drew him into a fierce bear hug. "I'm so sorry, Maddox. *So* sorry. Carter called me from the precinct and told me everything. Are you okay?"

The unexpected kindness after the unexpected hit knocked him for another kind of loop, and because he could, he wrapped her close and let the pain come. "I can't walk away from her, Raven. I can't. The idea tears me up inside."

"I know. I know." She stroked a hand up and down, up and down his back. "But you can't give up your badge either. You know that. Just because Captain Pornstache says you can't officially look for her doesn't mean you can't look unofficially, right?"

"Captain... Pornstache?" He pulled back and then laughed out loud. God, he'd needed that.

She shrugged. "Sorry. I couldn't remember his name, just that big ass pornstache."

He hugged her again, but this time, he lifted her off her feet the same way he did his big sister. "Mmm, I love you."

"Yeah, I know. Everyone does."

On a laugh, he wrapped an arm around her, and they walked to the living room. She grabbed one of the turquoise throw pillows his sister had said the eggshell-colored couch needed, bopped him upside the head with it, and then placed it behind her back for support.

He sat beside her. "When you knocked, I thought it was Carter coming to punch me himself." He hesitated. "How pissed is he?"

Her lips disappeared momentarily between her teeth. "Are we talking about the beginning of our phone call or the end?"

"That bad, huh?"

She patted his knee. "Don't worry. I talked sense into him."

"And then opted to come over and punch me yourself?"

"Just helpin' my man out. Besides, you deserved a good hit for what you said, but you also needed a hug. And since I figured you'd need the hug more, I pulled my punch."

He rubbed a hand over his tender jaw. "You call that pulling a punch?"

She shrugged. "One of my foster dads was former military. He taught me how to do more than rebuild engines, my friend."

"Obviously."

She angled her body to face him more fully. "Carter's not mad, by the way. I mean, he was, but it passed. He understands what you're going through, and you and I both know that if the same thing happened to me and someone told him to stop looking for me, he wouldn't—"

"Don't." He silenced her with a hand to her knee. "Don't even put that scenario out into the world. If something happened to you, it would break both of us, so just don't."

"Sorry." She covered his hand where it rested on her leg. "All I'm saying is that when he calmed down enough to think, he wasn't mad. At least at you. He's still pissed at Captain Pornstache."

"Captain Atkins."

"Semantics." She winked. "When I got off the phone, Carter was about to go back and talk to him. I'm fairly sure my man's still fighting for you *and* Katlyn."

"Which makes me feel all the shittier."

"Well, just don't. You've got enough worry on your plate already, so don't give this another thought, okay."

He nodded.

"The only thing you need to have on your plate tonight is figuring out what to do next about Katlyn—and enchiladas."

The thought of enchiladas perked him up. Raven's enchiladas were his favorite. "*Your* homemade ones?"

"Yup. Got everything I need to make them in the car, but *you* have to run out and grab everything. I brought beer, too. Everything we'll need to stuff our faces as we plan our next move."

*We.*

*Our.*

After what he'd said to Carter, Maddox didn't deserve either, but there they were, being offered as if he hadn't been the biggest ass wipe in history.

"Not that I don't want enchiladas, but I thought you and Carter had reserved one of the dungeons tonight at the club."

"We did, but you're more important than orgasms, and you know how much I like the orgasms Sir gives me."

Chuckling, Maddox pulled her in for another hug. Yeah, he most certainly didn't deserve *we*.

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Raven removed the enchiladas from the oven as a knock sounded against the door, gentler than the one that had announced her arrival.

"I'll get it." She placed the Pyrex dish on the potholders she'd already laid on the counter. "You can grab plates and beer, okay."

He nodded. It wasn't often—or ever—his partner's arrival made him nervous. Raven had said Carter wasn't angry, but Maddox hadn't quite been able to bring himself to believe it. What he'd said to Carter had been unforgivable.

Raven's voice mingled with Carter's, both speaking in hushed tones in the entryway. Maddox tried to ignore them as he grabbed three plates and set them on the island. He'd just grabbed three bottles of pale ale from the fridge when his partner walked into view.

Carter had one arm resting on his sub's shoulders. In his free hand, he carried an overnight bag. He'd changed clothes, too. Gone were the tie and slacks, replaced by jeans and a Ramones

T-shirt Raven had gifted him; she was a massive fan of grungy, punk rock bands that had come to popularity way before her time.

Maddox uncapped one of the beers and held it out to Carter as a peace offering. "Planning a trip?"

Carter took the bottle. "Yeah, well, I've got this idiot friend who has it in his head to go to Bumfuck, Montana. He's in a pretty shitty headspace, so I figured I should probably tag along and make sure he stays out of trouble."

"He is pretty fucked up right now. He's a complete ass wipe, and you'd be completely within your right to tell him to fuck off."

"Thought about it, but someone talked some sense into me." Carter turned an affectionate smile on Raven and brushed his lips along her temple.

And with that, Maddox knew they'd be okay.

"What about Captain Pornstache?" Raven asked. "He okay with this change of plans, or did you turn in your badge, too?"

"Okay, before I dive into what the captain said..." Carter grinned at Raven. "Captain Pornstache? God, Genny Malek, I adore you."

"At this point in our relationship, I'd hope so, Sir." Raven—or Genny Malek as Carter alone was privileged to call her—pushed onto her toes for another quick kiss.

Carter was still grinning when he turned back and placed his travel bag on the counter. After digging around inside a moment, he drew out a sidearm and a shield. Maddox recognized the Glock-22 and the worn black leather belt holster.

Maddox's heart kicked up a few beats. "That's mine."

"To quote Captain Pornstache, 'He didn't leave this. I didn't see this. I know nothing about this.' And then, he said you and I were to take two weeks of vacation to *recover* from our very hectic caseload."

Maddox nodded, understanding. Atkins had given him two more weeks to find Kat.

"So, for the next two weeks, partner, Katlyn is our *only* case. We will eat, sleep, and breathe her case, and when the two weeks are up..." Carter held his arms in an "I don't know" gesture, but they both knew what would happen in two weeks.

Maddox would again have to decide if he wanted to keep his badge or if he wanted to keep looking for the woman he wasn't supposed to love. Maddox didn't need two weeks to answer that question. Nothing short of finding Kat, one way or the other, would stop his search.

Carter continued. "I, um, also convinced the captain to give us twenty-four hours before he forwarded this info on to the feds."

Maddox looked a question at his partner. "Any particular reason you felt the need to convince him of this, aside from us wanting to do this ourselves?"

"Just something she said on the phone earlier." Carter inclined his head to Raven as if Maddox didn't know who *she* was. "She said something along the line of, 'I hope y'all manage to get there before he moves her this time,' and, well, it got me wondering if—"

"If someone is tipping Harris somehow?"

Carter shrugged, but it explained why they always seemed to be about a half step behind Harris. Holy fuck, how had Maddox not thought of this?

But even as the question formed, he knew the reason. He was too close for proper objectivity. There were reasons S.O.P. called to reassign cases if an investigating officer had any conflicts of interest, and Kat was one significant conflict of interest.

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Carter and Maddox stood alone on Maddox's third-story patio. They each had a beer in hand and way too many enchiladas in their stomachs, but the silence was companionable as they leaned

against the railing and watched Dallas settle in for the night. The city never went entirely to sleep, but this was undoubtedly her quiet time.

"What're you going to do when we find her?" Carter said after a long while.

"Make sure she stays safe and that Harris pays." But that wasn't what Carter was asking, and Maddox knew it.

"I meant after all that." Another long beat stretched out between them as a vehicle zoomed by, the twang of some country song assaulting their eardrums for two seconds too many. "I know you love her, but you have to know it can't go anywhere."

Maddox didn't argue because his partner wasn't saying anything Maddox hadn't thought himself. He couldn't be part of her life, not when he was intrinsically linked to her hellish past. He wasn't her future, no matter how much he wanted to be. Best case scenario, he was the bridge she'd use on her way to a new, brighter future without Jeff Fucking Harris.

"Even if she feels the same way for you," Carter continued, "you could never put her into bondage. You could never take her to *Restrained Fantasies*. You could never, ever be with her the way I know you want to be, not with her history."

Maddox took a long pull of his ale. *Restrained Fantasies* was the Dallas BDSM club where he, Carter, and Raven were all members. It was also his second home—or was. It was where he'd first met Raven, where Carter and Raven had hooked up, and yes, it was a place Maddox would like to take Kat if...

*If.*

So many goddamned *ifs*.

"I know it's not what you want to hear." Carter's voice was soft, almost apologetic. "But the chances of Katlyn ever being able to separate the abuse she's suffered and consensual power exchange are pretty much zilch."

"Raven did it."

"That was different. Their situations were different, and there were times I didn't think Genny would ever be able to trust me enough. But while what she went through was tough, it's nothing like what Katlyn went through—what she's likely going through right now."

Carter was right, and Maddox knew it. He'd never be able to be Kat's Dom, and he doubted he could ever not be a Dom. Like being a cop, being a Dom was who he was. But today, in a moment of anger, he'd willingly given up his badge for Kat. He could give up being a Dom, right?

But as another car drove by, blasting another country song, Maddox knew the answer. He wouldn't be able to give up being a Dom any more than he could give up being a cop, at least long term. No matter how much he loved Kat, he was a cop *and* a Dom, two parts of the same whole.