
SUMMARY

*A Mistresses of the Board Room and Knights of the Board Room “revisit”
vignette*

At the end of *At Her Command*, Book 1 of the Mistresses of the Board Room series, Lawrence and Rosalinda were preparing to attend a barbecue at the home of friends. Initially, this was going to be the epilogue, a fun add-on. However, several ideas of what could happen at the barbecue were too good not to pursue. Since their story was already a pretty hefty length, I decided to offer this scene as one of our beloved vignette “revisits” instead.

I hope you enjoy the results!

THE BARBECUE

A Beard Room Crossover Vignette

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The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. Reader discretion is advised.

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“Communal showers and homoerotic dominance displays. Like pillow fights that turn into wrestling matches, while the participants wear nothing but strategically loose jeans, riding low so I can see bare hip bones and the rise of a tight ass. Because, no underwear.”

Finished with her description—though she had plenty more details to share if her one-man audience cared to hear them—Rosalinda glanced over at Lawrence. He was sitting in the passenger seat of her Mustang, staring at her in green-eyed fascination.

“*That’s* what you think guys are really doing when they get together to watch sports and drink beer?”

“No more than men really believe women wear lingerie and have lesbian encounters at slumber parties.” She sent him a wicked smile. “But we can all fantasize.”

“I didn’t realize women put that much thought into it.”

“That’s a lie,” she said. “You know just how extensive my sexual imagination is.”

“Not a lie. Your imagination is one of a kind. Just like you, Mistress.”

“Ass kisser,” she snorted.

His gaze slid down her torso to linger on the mentioned part of her anatomy, an open invitation. Ros punched his solid shoulder.

“I knew I should have driven,” he said. “Both hands on the wheel, Mistress. Else we’ll end up in a field.”

The rural route leading to Dale and Athena’s home outside New Orleans was a little narrow, the shoulders non-existent, but he was teasing her. He knew she was an excellent driver. However, her former SEAL was protective. He preferred to be behind the wheel, which was exactly why she sometimes chose to drive.

A reminder he didn’t have to always be in control.

Whether from training or by nature—or some intriguing combination of both—a SEAL was an alpha. While he was every bit of that, Lawrence had a fascinating service sub core, a prime example of how the gods could bestow the most unexpected and delightful gifts on Mistress-kind. When Ros took the reins, she could demand his surrender, and he would give it to her.

He needed that. Inside that zone, she protected him, helped him know he could relinquish everything to her. And it worked, because he trusted her. She’d never valued that from a submissive as much as she did from him. But then, she’d never been so completely in love with a man as she was with Lawrence Barrera Gatlin.

She trusted him enough to give him that, too.

“Since you’ve dashed my hopes about shirtless wrestling matches,” she said, “what do you men do at these barbecues?”

He chuckled. “That question doesn’t really apply to today. When it’s at Athena’s place, it’s nothing like the barbecues we did at Dale’s crappy shotgun house.”

He’d stretched out his arm, had his forearm propped against the side of her seat, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder, fingers brushing the side of her neck. She’d put her hair up today, leaving some wispy strands on her neck that he played with, sending promising tingles down her nape to her mostly bare

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shoulders. The crochet knit blue dress she wore had slender straps. “When we did it at Dale’s, it’d just be me, Neil and Max, and a couple team guys who’d drive up from Texas,” he explained. “The guest list today is different.”

It certainly was, though Neil and Max would still be there. But so would Matt Kensington, his four-man executive team from K&A, and their wives. As well as her own inner circle from Thomas Rose Associates, Vera, Cyn, Abby and Skye.

“There can never be too many beautiful women in one place,” Dale had said, when he’d extended the invitation to her four closest friends. Initially he’d offered Ros’s invite to Lawrence, teasing her by telling Lawrence to bring his “plus-one.”

Ros was sure it wasn’t an accident that everyone who was attending today, with the exception of Neil, was part of the Dom/sub lifestyle. While there wasn’t any indication this would be a play party, there were few purely social venues where Doms/subs could get together and enjoy unguarded banter or discussion about the behind-the-curtain world they inhabited.

Which meant even if more sexual things weren’t happening, the relaxed environment would offer some interesting undercurrents. Especially with the amenities Athena’s home offered. Dale had said they planned to make use of their indoor swimming pool, so everyone should bring their swimsuits.

Ros didn’t regret the new tattoo between her shoulder blades, blue roses embellishing the SEAL motto, “*The only easy day was yesterday.*” It honored the man to whom she’d committed herself. However, since the tattoo had been acquired so recently, it would be a couple weeks before she could get in a pool.

She’d told Lawrence she had a vivid imagination, and she could imagine in great detail how it would feel, her bikini allowing her to press her bare wet flesh against his muscled torso, her arms and legs wrapped around him as they floated together.

To compensate her for the loss of that experience today, she

could always pull the car over now, straddle Lawrence and enjoy the fine body that was all hers to play with. But she decided to hold off. She liked intensity in her sex, and nothing filled that cup like delayed gratification.

Plus, technically, she'd had him right before they left the house. Her gaze flicked to the clock in the dash. About forty-five minutes ago. She suppressed a smile at herself, and at him, because the way his fingers were trailing along her neck, she knew his mind was on the same track.

When it came to her enjoyment of Lawrence, she considered insatiability another gift of the gods. But because he was the focus of her heart as well as her libido, she returned to the subject of team-only barbecues.

"You're still going to keep getting together like you did at Dale's, right?"

"Oh yeah. We may rotate it between his old place—since he's still renting it to keep a presence in that neighborhood—and one of the Texas guys. Max said we can include him in that plan, because Janet said she'd just do a night out with friends when he has us over to their place."

"Good."

SEALs couldn't talk much with family about work-related experiences, due to the classified details. Having been soul-deep in her complex sub, Ros knew there were tough things attached to those missions. The camaraderie of those who'd been there with them, or in similar scenarios, mitigated the emotional debris.

Since she had a Mistress's normal desire to open up every closed door inside her sub, she admitted Lawrence no longer being on active duty made it easier for her to handle the locked areas on his military life. Somewhat. When it did become frustrating, she reminded herself of what active-duty SEAL wives or girlfriends had to handle. Their men going away for days, weeks or months at a time, with no clue or information on where, or doing what.

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Like his best friend Neil. He was still active duty.

The silence in the car alerted her to a change in the energy between them. When Ros glanced his way, she saw Lawrence's expression had become pensive.

"There's something I probably need to mention to you," he said. "You notice things, Mistress, and I don't want you to think there's anything wrong if it happens."

She raised a brow. "That was cryptic."

He chuckled again, but the deep, pleasurable sound of it was guarded, his normal tone when he skirted close to the SEAL stuff. Curious. "Yeah, sorry. You know how you said Matt's team and their wives will be there?"

"Yes. Have you met all of them?"

"Not all, but Max has shared a lot about them. Non-confidential stuff, things from working security and transport for them. Dale also sometimes joins in on poker games with Matt, so he's talked about them, too." He paused. "I've met Marcie and Dana."

Dana was married to Peter Winston, Matt's operations manager. Marcie was with K&A's lawyer, Ben O'Callahan.

Dana was a former Army sergeant who'd been blinded by an IED in Iraq. She was now a minister in one of New Orleans' roughest areas. The same neighborhood where Dale's shotgun house was located.

Marcie was a corporate investigator who'd recently been on track to become a member of the New Orleans police department, a plan temporarily on hold, as she was now pregnant with her and Ben's first child.

Lawrence's pause told Ros the two women were the source of his concern. Since she'd rolled up on a four-way stop intersection bordered by fields, and there was no traffic coming behind her, she let the engine idle and turned her full attention to him.

"I can't tell you the circumstances of how I met them," he said. "But I haven't seen Dana and Marcie since then in a social setting like this, so today might feel a little awkward for them at

first. Probably not so much for Dana, because she's former military. But I'm not sure how Marcie will handle it. We won't be discussing any of it, though. A lot of asses could be thrown in the fire if it is."

"If it wasn't a SEAL team mission—and I assume with her involvement, it wasn't—it's not classified."

Yes, she was usually okay with those locked doors. But when it wasn't something she couldn't officially be told...it rankled. Which was likely why he was bringing it up now. He knew her better than she sometimes liked to admit.

"Not government-classified, no," he said. "But we're treating it the same way. Can you be okay with that?"

"If I said no?" she asked.

He held her gaze. "There are more lives at stake than mine, so the information isn't for me to share."

She pursed her lips. "Okay. As long as you understand that hearing your life is one of those at stake makes me unhappy about being out of the loop. It also doesn't make me feel warm and fuzzy toward the two women who put you at risk."

He touched her hand. "It had to do with Max, Rosalinda. A team guy in trouble. I have to trust you never to repeat that, not to anyone. Not because I don't think you or the women you call your sisters can't be trusted. It's simply that the more information is spread, the greater the chances it reaches the wrong people, no matter how inadvertently. Too many already know about it as it is."

Being a marketing executive, she knew just how viral information of any kind could be. To show him she could accept it, albeit reluctantly, she turned her hand, gripped his. "Okay," she said.



Everything he'd told her was true. But Lawrence knew he could trust her with any secret, even this one. Him keeping her out of

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it was for her protection. However, as that would have flown like an anchor weight attached to his balls, he'd wisely kept that reason to himself.

On civilian ground, there were ways well beyond the law to deal with bad guys, but he didn't go down that road unless pushed to it. A team guy's life on the line was a big push. Even so, in the aftermath, he'd wrestled with it, same as he was sure Neil and Dale did. Not because it hadn't needed to be done. The bad guys they'd taken out were the same stripe, no question, as those they'd taken out beyond their borders. No, the hindsight regret came from knowing how bad the fallout would be if it ever came to light. Civilians had been involved—Janet, Marcie and Dana.

A group of SEALs acting in lethal concert on U.S. soil, even if it was to save one of their own, was a shitstorm waiting to happen. Anyone else brought into it after the fact were still accessories. No way would he bring that threat to Rosalinda or her people.

He'd initially met Rosalinda when he'd been hired to protect her. Now that he belonged to her—and her to him—that was a lifetime job he'd never back away from. Even if it pissed her off.

Dale had seen Marcie and Dana plenty of times since then, so it might be overkill, prepping his Mistress like this. But the mind could be a tricky bastard. Neil and Lawrence's exposure to Marcie and Dana had been mostly attached to that one traumatic day, so seeing them again in a social setting might set something off, particularly for Marcie.

As he'd told Rosalinda, he knew things about Matt's men and their wives through Max, and Max was particularly close to Dana, since he was her primary driver to and from the church where she worked as a minister. So Lawrence knew that Marcie had had some trauma issues for a while after the event. Mostly resolved, but still. Those things had a way of lingering in unpleasant ways. He didn't know anyone who'd been in combat

who didn't deal with nightmares or sleepless nights in the aftermath.

He hoped today wouldn't trigger any bad things for her, but there was one thing he didn't have to worry about. Rosalinda didn't seem like she was going to give him any more flack about it. As she turned onto Athena's driveway, she was smiling, craning her neck to look at the archway formed by the interlaced arms of the old oaks lining the road.

Roy, Athena's late husband, had been CEO of a major company, and Athena had been his strong right hand. After his death, she had continued on as top dog on the board of directors.

The large, graceful brick home and expansive grounds were impressive, but not off-putting. He liked Athena's place. Everything looked and felt warm and inviting, like a home should be. When Rosalinda turned onto the circular drive in front of the house, Lawrence saw they weren't the first arrival. A handful of vehicles were parked off to the side, and he recognized Matt's Escalade, Cyn's glossy black pickup truck with the gun rack in the rear window, and Vera's car. He bet she and Skye had ridden together. He also saw a gleaming McLaren Roadster. Max had said it had once belonged to Ben, but had been given to Marcie as a wedding gift by the K&A team. Lawrence expected there was a story there.

Though they were still technically in the grip of winter, NOLA weather had cooperated with a sunny, warmish day. Even so, Dale and Athena's heated indoor pool would come in handy.

After she parked, Lawrence came around and opened Rosalinda's door for her. That blue crocheted dress she'd worn clung to her curves and swished around her fabulous legs. The dress's back was low enough that he could see the tattoo she'd surprised him with, and which he kept wanting to stroke. Soon enough, when it was healed. For now, it was enough to look at his Mistress and see the additional proof that she'd given him her heart.

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He gestured toward the left side of the house. “We can follow that walkway around back. They have a pavilion outfitted like a second kitchen for outdoor entertaining and grilling.”

Rosalinda linked arms with him, her hand smooth and cool wrapped over his biceps. “You’re pretty familiar with this place.”

He shouldered the tote with their extra clothes, their bodies pleasantly brushing. “Yeah. When my leg got torn up, Dale and Athena put me up here. Helped take care of me.”

Dale had insisted. Probably because he knew the worst thing Lawrence was handling wasn’t an injury, but the news he could no longer be in the field.

His decision to take an honorable discharge had been heart-ripping, but a lot had happened since then, including the woman he was escorting. Lawrence had made his peace with it.

“I’d already met Athena before that, when we brought some of the rec center kids here for a play day, but during those rehab weeks was when I really got to know her. She didn’t hover too much, but she always seemed to know when I needed something, and the right way to help. She has a staff here, a maid, gardener and cook, but I helped them out however I could, so I didn’t feel useless, and she was cool with that.” He lifted a shoulder. “Truth? She made me see this place like a second home.”



Ros knew it was ridiculous to bristle at hearing another woman had won Lawrence’s affection. She credited it to Lawrence being so newly hers. That absurd possessiveness of the “honeymoon” period.

Athena had made a couple appearances at Progeny with Dale, as his submissive. Dale preferred a smaller club, Club Release, so when he’d brought her to Progeny, they’d played in a private room. Once back in the social area, Athena hadn’t said much, recovering from the session, content to be held in Dale’s lap or curled up next to him on one of the roomy sofas.

Ros had tracked her in the business world, though, and maybe that was part of her mixed feelings now. The gracious woman born into old money was the definition of Southern magnolia. Never abrasive and always diplomatic, unfailingly polite and kind, yet somehow managing to guide her company's board and her company itself exactly where she wanted it to go.

Ros was a far more aggressive personality in business dealings. She'd run that gauntlet early in her career, labeled bitchy when she acted in a manner that would have been considered admirably aggressive in her male counterparts. The same thing often happened with Dommies versus Doms. People evaluated strength in men and women differently.

Being a New York native, transplanted to the deep South, had added another layer to that. She'd met the challenges, though, making more friends than enemies while succeeding in her own business goals. So she shouldn't be feeling the defensive wariness or odd resentment toward Athena she was feeling.

Even so, as Lawrence spotted Athena at the pavilion he'd mentioned and guided them that way, Ros was already glancing around, looking for her own people. If Lawrence's conversation with Athena went on longer than Ros wanted to participate, she could make an excuse and slip away.

"There you are, sweetheart." Athena's smile lit up her face, and she already had her arms open to give Lawrence a warm hug. A beautiful woman approaching fifty, Athena had sea glass green eyes and lustrous brown hair with blond streaks. As she slid back, her hands stayed on his upper arms, while Ros noted Lawrence's remained at her trim waist.

From conversations with Dale, Ros remembered Athena's preferred workout was swimming. No surprise, with the indoor pool. Well, Athena might keep in great shape with her laps, but her pretty manicure wouldn't last a minute in Ros's male-dominated boxing gym.

One-upping the woman in her mind? Really?

The pool house was nearby, framed with wooden timbers

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and brick trim to give it a more natural look and complement the main house architecture. The indoor pool fed into an outdoor one through a picturesque pass-through made to look like a rock grotto. The water of the outdoor pool sparkled in the sun.

Dale had been overseeing a massive grill nearby, where it appeared a variety of meat was being prepared, but now he stepped over to greet her. He had Max with him. Lawrence lifted a hand in greeting, but directed his words to Athena.

“You got everything under control, including Master Chief?” Lawrence shot Dale a grin. “You know all she has to do is say the word and Max and I will beat you up. Even if we have to call Neil in to do it proper.”

“Yeah, it would take three of you,” Dale grunted.

“Just steal his peg leg and he can’t do any ass kicking,” Neil suggested, glancing down. Dale had a prosthetic leg, not that anyone could tell when he was wearing jeans and boots, like now.

“I’ll beat you to death with that leg,” Dale retorted. “Adapt, survive and—”

“Thrive,” the two men finished. Athena shot Ros an amused look and then surprised her with a hug that was lighter but just as genuine as the one she’d given Lawrence.

“I’m so glad you two could make it. Lawrence knows the place like the back of his hand, so make yourself at home. There are plenty of places to sit and relax and chat. Over there, at the coolers and the outdoor fridge, you’ll find a huge selection of drinks. Mixes are on the wet bar. I thought about hiring a bartender for the day, but Dale said let’s just keep it informal and intimate.”

The brief pause over the last word, and Athena’s direct gaze, confirmed Ros’s thought that they’d set it up to encourage natural but not formal Dom/sub interaction.

“Some of your ladies have already arrived.” Athena drew Ros’s attention back to what she’d already noticed, a nearby grouping of chairs where Vera, Cyn and Skye were chatting with

Cassandra and Dana. Vera had already lifted a hand in greeting when Ros had logged their presence.

Cassandra, a corporate negotiator, was married to Lucas, Matt's CFO. She had an impressive record for obtaining what her clients wanted. Rumor was, she and Lucas had been engaged within a day of her first meet with the Kensington & Associates team. Ros wondered who had negotiated that one, since Lucas was a pretty hard-nosed negotiator himself.

"How can I help you?" Lawrence asked Athena. Their hostess gave his arm a quick squeeze.

"You're always so kind to ask, but I have things in hand. Lynn left me set up on enough food for an army, and that's even without the meat."

"Neil's in the rec storage room with Peter and Lucas, looking for the tag football set," Max said. "We'll get our appetites up to handle all that food."

"I saw Matt's car," Ros said. "Where's he hiding?"

"He and Savannah are walking the gardens, getting ideas for a re-landscaping of their own place. Ben and Marcie are in the kitchen, because he brought a dessert that needed a final touch. Janet's with them." When Athena paused, mentally ticking off all the guests, Ros noted the indulgent warmth in Dale's gaze. He stepped to his wife's side, sliding an arm around her waist, hand wrapping around her hip. Athena automatically laid her palm on his chest and sent him a smile. "Lists are important," she told him.

"Don't I know it." He brushed his lips over her temple, his grip tightening while her body melded into his as if proximity alone created the reaction. Ros suspected it did, understanding it far better now than she had before she and Lawrence met.

"Even the Bible starts with one," Dale said solemnly. "Create the sky and earth. Create the animals. Create man. Take pity on the poor bastard and create a woman to write checklists for him."

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“Which begs the question, if God is a man, who put together that list for *Him*?” Ros pointed out.

“He has an incredibly efficient admin, like Janet,” Max said dryly. “I think she’s in line for the job when God gets brave enough to bring her up there.”

“Or He is in fact a She,” Ros rejoined. Athena chuckled and gave her a conspiratorial nod.

“I’ll hold with that. Jon and Rachel are on their way. Rachel had an emergency with one of her PT patients—he had a bad fall that set him back—so she wanted to stop at the hospital to check on him.”

Dale gave Athena another kiss, a squeeze, and moved back toward the grill, whatever happening there catching his attention. Max sent a quizzical look toward Lawrence, an unspoken invitation to join them. Ros tossed Lawrence a wry look. “Official permission to do the male bonding thing, sailor.”

He grinned, but she noted his quick assessing look. While she was a CEO, a marketing professional fully capable of handling herself in any social or professional situation, he was keyed into her personal state of mind. This was supposed to be a friendly and enjoyable gathering. He wanted her to be relaxed, having fun, and he’d likely picked up on that frisson of tension about Athena.

She smiled, bumped his hip with her own, telling him it really was okay. As he moved away, she turned back toward Dale’s wife. Before they were wiped clean by her friendly expression, two things flashed over Athena’s countenance.

Defensiveness and speculation.

It startled Ros, because it was a mirror of what she was guarding with her own social game face.

Vera handled HR and legal for Thomas Rose Associates, but in many ways, she was also the team’s spiritual compass. She’d told Ros, more than once, a competitive ego was both strength and weakness.

“It will give you the resolve to move forward, to succeed, but it’s next-

door neighbors with your insecurities. When someone is rubbing you the wrong way, look at whether it's really them, or if Insecurity has come over to have a cup of coffee with Ego and overstayed its welcome."

Her defensiveness around Athena was based partly on thinking the fellow businesswoman would consider her too abrasive and...well, not ladylike, according to Southern belle standards. Something she'd entirely imposed on Athena, as it had never been expressed by Athena herself in any way Ros could mark.

Whereas Athena's same emotion toward her made Ros wonder if the woman thought Ros judged her for not being more typically aggressive in the business world. Or maybe for being a submissive. Sometimes there was that tension between women who chose different sides of the Dom/sub dynamic, but who both held positions of power in the mundane world.

Ros had once held that bias, no denying it. But she'd gotten past it, enough that she could expand on it further now, to include her and Athena's personality differences. She and Athena were women who got shit done, in the way that best suited their personalities. End of story.

Athena had the brains to reach that conclusion herself, so Ros shifted to the speculative part. When Athena had hugged Lawrence, held onto him that extra moment, she'd glanced at Ros with some of that same assessing gaze.

She cared deeply about Lawrence, and Ros was a relative unknown to Athena in that capacity. Despite being a welcoming hostess, Athena was also shrewdly evaluating everything Ros and Lawrence were projecting as a couple.

Ros was looking at a woman who hadn't hesitated to open up her home to Lawrence when he needed help, and not just to stick him in a guest house where she had to do little more than provide him a place to sleep. She and Dale had cared for him during one of the hardest things an operator faced—the end of his career with the teams.

Lawrence was clearly very attached to Athena. Whereas

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Athena's reaction to him seemed almost motherly. Maybe some of Ros's waspish feelings connected to that as well, since Ros and Athena were only a few years apart, and Lawrence was younger than them both. Not much younger, but still.

That aside, the same point was there to be made. They were two women who had a different relationship with him. One a Mistress who loved him enough to want him forever, one a loyal friend who hadn't hesitated to be there when he'd needed one.

Time to cut through the bullshit, the same way Ros did when she identified a problem obstructing a successful business relationship.

"Thank you," she said to Athena.

Athena raised a brow, those intelligent green eyes blandly curious. "For what?"

"For taking good care of him. He adores you." Ros grimaced, a half-smile. "It makes me want to dislike you, but that's the territorial side of my nature, not the smart one. The smart side is very glad he had you and Dale during a terrible time."

Athena's expression softened immediately. When Insecurity and Ego got too friendly, brutal Honesty could break up the alliance in just the right way. Ros could almost feel that welcome click between her and Athena that said the wall had come down, no need to navigate a field of eggshells between them.

"He's such a kind man." Athena glanced fondly toward Lawrence, standing at the grill with Max and Dale. "Notice how his first thought was to ask me if I needed any help? He did that even when he was first discharged from the hospital and could barely walk. SEALs absolutely suck at knowing how to accept weakness, however temporary it is."

The unexpectedly blunt choice of words startled a chuckle out of Ros. "He did better than most," Athena continued. "Though Dale told me that was why he brought him into our home. He knew Lawrence wouldn't go too deep down the self-pity well if he had to behave himself around me, manage his temper and emotions. Since Lawrence still has both of his legs

and Dale is a below-the-knee amputee, that only reinforced things. But he had some bad moments where my heart just broke for him. Ah, there's Matt and Savannah."

Her gaze moved toward the house, and Ros followed it. The couple in question had emerged from the garden area Athena had mentioned. After they exchanged a couple words, Matt kissed Savannah, a lingering thing with his hand on her face, fingers stroking along her throat. When he was close to her like that, everything between them said she was his beloved submissive, him her undisputable Dom. That orientation was obvious here, in a way it hadn't been to Ros when she'd first met the woman.

In all fairness, away from her husband, and even with him, in business settings, Savannah was a CEO with a formidable reputation. Though they were obviously devoted to one another, Ros rarely saw them at a social event like this, where the two corporate moguls might indulge tender gestures.

She noted their hands held an extra second at the length of their arms before they let one another go and Savannah headed their way, Matt proceeding toward the grilling area.

"They're something to watch, aren't they?" Athena said quietly. "Both of them are so reserved. I think Matt could make millions playing poker, unless he was playing across the table from her. It shoots you straight in the heart, how much they obviously mean to one another."

She sent Ros a smile. "They both waited a good part of their lives to find that person who was their soul match, but she's his first and last, and he's hers. When I see them acting that way toward one another, it's like a magnet. I have to look at Dale, or go be near him."

The woman was comfortable speaking her mind and heart, and Ros liked that. She also found Athena's description right on target, since she'd pretty much echoed what Ros was thinking. And feeling. And doing. Because right after looking at Matt and

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Savannah, Ros had shot a quick look toward Lawrence, wanting that visual contact.

He'd felt it, turning his head to meet her gaze. Something deeper than pleasure surged in her at that confirmation of the bond that connected them. Those steady eyes holding hers an extra beat reminded her of every intimate way, emotional and physical, they knew one another.

Ros pulled herself back to Athena, arching a brow. "This isn't a play party, but you're setting a tone, aren't you?"

"I sure hope so." Athena said, her eyes twinkling.

Savannah was wearing casual slacks and a sleeveless cotton knit that brought out her blue eyes. Her blond hair was in an artful twist up on her head. The hand she reached out to Ros was manicured.

"Ros," she said, pressing her hand. "So nice to finally see you when it's not about business. But I do want to thank you for the excellent job TRA did with Tennyson's marketing on the industry conference schedule. The response has been phenomenal in our drill press division, just as we'd hoped."

"Glad to hear it, and I'll pass that on to Cyn. She oversaw the project management on that one personally."

"Since she's here, I'll also tell her directly."

"Want a drink?" Athena asked Savannah, gesturing to the small cooler next to her. "I have a good Chardonnay."

"That'd be lovely." Savannah's gaze moved briefly back to her husband, who had joined the knot of men at the grill. Ros shifted to Athena's side so they could take in the tableau together.

Neil, Peter and Lucas had emerged from the rec building Max had indicated. Though they, too, were headed for the male-dominated cooking area, they detoured briefly to drop a sack of sports equipment on the asphalt of the basketball court.

"Looking at them never gets old, does it?" Savannah observed. Athena's chuckle held a suggestive note.

"I was just telling Ros about Lawrence staying with us.

However, in the interest of full disclosure,” Athena sent Ros an amused look and then nudged Savannah, “I may mother Dale’s boys a lot, but that is definitely *not* the first thought that comes to mind when I see them get together. God bless the many ways that cotton and denim can praise the male form.”

“Amen, sister.”

Apparently, the other group of women had decided to come over. Ros turned to see Dana, Peter’s wife, standing just behind them. She was the one who’d issued the comment. Since Dana was blind, she had her arm linked through Skye’s. Dana fished outward with her cane and touched Athena’s leg with it, tapped a couple times.

“We absolutely have to get them out of their clothes this afternoon. You know, to go swimming in the indoor pool.” Dana’s white teeth flashed. “All those lovely wet muscles.”

Cass scoffed as she pulled one of the nearby chairs closer. “So the blind girl can accidentally grope everyone?”

“I do that even when they’re wearing clothes,” Dana said, unruffled. “Less clothes just make it more fun.”

“With Peter having to spank you for bad behavior all the damn time, please explain how you are *ever* able to sit?”

“There are other ways I apologize to the Captain for that,” Dana dimpled toward Cass. “Saves my sweet ass a couple beatings.”

Cyn tossed Ros a rakish wink, while Vera nodded invitingly to a chair she pulled into the circle that was forming. A natural congregation point around Athena’s base of operations was happening, the women settling in to get to know one another.

She and Savannah were considered the pack leaders of their respective circles of women, Athena on even ground with them, corporately speaking. Since the three of them had now approached one another and set the tone, the others coming to join them made sense.

Ros could laugh at the idea, but it didn’t make it less true. As Mistresses, every one of Ros’s ladies were close studies of human

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interaction. Especially men, even those who might not be their preferred submissive type.

As if reading her mind, Skye was signaling her. Her mute IT/communications director signed a two-word suggestion, aimed toward the grilling area. *Watch them.*

She meant the men who'd served together, because Ros saw it almost immediately. As Max, Neil, Lawrence and Dale were talking, Neil bent to a cooler, pulled out a beer, tossed it Max's way with barely a glance in his direction. The same way Max caught it. Though Matt, Lucas and Peter were interspersed among them, in the loose semi-circle around Dale, the SEALs were angled so the net effect was that every approach was covered. Which also included the area around the nearby women.

"It's like they fall back into a team dynamic, no matter how long it's been since they were out in the field together," Vera observed.

"Down range," Ros said absently. "That's what they call it."

Looking at them reminded Ros of the one person here not actively in the Dom/sub world. Neil, Lawrence's tall, lean friend, stood in a relaxed, cocked hip pose at Lawrence's shoulder.

Neil had made his interest in Abby, Ros's CFO and closest friend, clear. Abby was a Mistress. However, if Dale had deemed that Neil's interest could actually go somewhere, despite Neil not being a submissive, then Neil's invitation to this event had been deliberate.

The day was getting more and more interesting. Especially if Abby would get her ass here. Ros wondered how long it would take Neil to approach her, casually ask about Abby's ETA.

She gave it fifteen minutes.

Skye had nodded toward the men and fluttered her fingers, then tasted each one with a glint in her gaze. Finger-licking good. The women chuckled.

"I don't remember that particular gesture in the ASL dictionary," Vera observed.

“You don’t have to include the obvious stuff,” Cyn said, pantomiming a jerk-off with a loosely curled fist. Vera tossed a bottle cap at her.

“Crude woman.”

“Hey, blind woman here. Someone tell me what gestures we’re talking about,” Dana said.

Ros saw Cass open her mouth to answer, but Skye had already taken Dana’s hand, closed it over hers, and then brought her hand back to Skye’s mouth, so the other woman could feel what she’d done with her fingers. Then she made the crude gesture that Cyn had as a follow up, Dana’s hand still on hers. Dana chuckled.

“Okay, yes. Totally in agreement.”

Ros suspected they’d all considered the potential problems in communication between a blind person and a mute one. Skye was pretty proactive on those things, though. From Dana’s relaxed championing of her own needs, Ros had a feeling the woman was the same.

Vera looked toward Ros. “Abby?”

“On her way. Supposedly.”

Vera, Skye and Cyn exchanged a look. Ros covered the significant pause by taking the chair Vera had offered. Athena pulled one up between her and Savannah, before reaching for a bottle from the cooler for herself.

“I’d offer you a drink again,” she said to Ros, her eyes twinkling, “but you’re already covered.”

She didn’t have to ask what Athena meant, because a glass of shimmering golden wine, her preferred vintage she was sure, appeared at her shoulder. She tipped her head back to look at Lawrence, bending over her shoulder.

“I like the service at this restaurant,” she said. “And the servers.”

“Here to serve and service as needed,” he rejoined in the same low tone, his gaze on hers, except for the slight dip toward the view the lacy crochet dress’s vee-neckline gave him. As she

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took the wine from him, his other hand was curved over her shoulder, his thumb sliding along her skin above the tattoo.

“Janet’s finally joining us,” Cass noted, likely for Dana’s benefit, but drawing their attention toward Matt’s admin as she emerged from the house. “She must have gotten tired of watching Ben drool over Athena’s appliances.”

“Or he got so aroused by them he decided to ravish Marcie next to your food processor and she didn’t care to stay and watch,” Dana said.

“What are you all laughing about?” Janet asked. Athena had risen from her chair and come around the outside of the circle to give her a welcoming hug. Ros nodded to Matt’s admin and received a dip of her sharp chin in return. Sharp was always the word that came to mind for Janet. Sharp mind, sharp face, a body like a graceful blade. It made sense that Matt would employ someone almost as terrifying as himself to handle his admin needs.

But Janet was a fair, tough and honest woman, which meant Ros liked her immensely. She was also a Mistress bonded to a man who wasn’t a submissive, though Max was very service-oriented. It made Ros wonder if Neil was picking Max’s brain on the best approach to Abby.

Janet rolled her eyes when Athena explained the reason for their laughter. “I’d never have let Ben do such a thing in your beautiful kitchen,” she informed Athena. “But even if he’d thought of it, he was interrupted by a call from our legal department. He’s currently pacing up and down in your reading room, putting out the fire they discovered. He’s going to be a few minutes.”

“Or more than,” Marcie said, arriving right on Janet’s heels. Marcie was wearing black leggings and a turquoise tunic-style top that picked up the vivid blue of her eyes. Her pregnancy was starting to show beneath the flowing cotton fabric, a slightly swelling belly and fuller breasts. Since Marcie had already been generously endowed in the latter area, Ros

suspected she was going to need some back support when she was full term.

Marcie worked out at the same boxing gym as Cyn and Ros, so Ros saw Ben's wife frequently enough to have already registered the body changes. However, the softer clothes, her hair waving full and lustrous around her arresting features, emphasized it a different way today. Cyn and Marcie still sparred, but now the sessions were more about practicing form than their usual competitive brawls, in deference to the life Marcie was carrying.

Marcie bounced up behind Dana's chair and leaned down to hug her. "Hey, Trouble," she said. "I saw through the kitchen window you found a hot woman to lead you around." She grinned at Skye, sitting at Dana's side. "Be careful, she's handsy."

"No one's as handsy as Dana," Janet noted. "Max says so."

"Well, maybe he needs to think about what *he* does to *make* me grope him." Dana's teeth flashed again. "Or you. Change that sexy aftershave he wears to something like onions and day-old fish." Her dark sunglasses reflected the afternoon sun.

Vera sighed and sent Janet a commiserating look. "I see Matt deals with the same inappropriate behavior that I do."

"If we put Dana on payroll, Max could sue K&A for a million-dollar harassment suit and retire to the islands," Janet said practically. "Unfortunately, the church she ministers at would merely file for bankruptcy." She flicked Dana's ear and dodged the quick swat from the blind woman. "That aftershave is called soap."

"You can't leave Matt," Savannah pointed out to Janet. "He'd put out a contract on Max if he tried to whisk you away to the tropics."

In response to Marcie's comment about Dana being handsy, Skye had smiled broadly and signed. The meaning didn't need any translation, though Marcie laughed and repeated it. "Handsy doesn't bother you, because you're already all about the hands. That's good." She extended her own to shake Skye's in greeting.

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“You must be Skye. I don’t think we’ve formally met. I’m Marcie O’Callahan.”

“You’re as handsy as I am,” Dana said. “You just have a much meaner Dom to keep you in line. Not that it seems to stop you all that often.”

Marcie’s eyes filled with love. Ros had a feeling that gooey look happened anytime someone mentioned Ben, directly or indirectly. The two hadn’t been married for long. But before Marcie could issue the retort that had a smile still flirting on her lips, her gaze slid over to Ros.

Ros saw the slight hitch, the shadow that crossed Marcie’s face as she noticed Lawrence behind her chair. It was gone in a blink, but Lawrence had caught it. When his hand curled on Ros’s shoulder, conveying tension, Ros covered it with her own hand, a casual gesture. He might not need the reassurance to handle this, but she’d offer it.

Marcie’s gaze moved to the grill and found Neil. The women had continued to volley comments back and forth, so no one else might be noticing it, but Ros saw Cass did. Cass was Marcie’s older sister, so she’d be paying closer attention. She reached out and gripped Marcie’s hand.

Marcie looked toward her, but at her sister’s quizzical look, she shook her head and sent her an “all good,” expression. It didn’t entirely alleviate Cass’s close regard, but Dana provided a distraction.

“So how’s the bundle of joy?” the blind woman asked, brushing her knuckles along the rise of Marcie’s belly.

“Joyously making me hurl my guts out and want to eat weird stuff, like tree bark.” Marcie grimaced. “I’ve become very empathetic to movies about demonic possession. I’m going to have one of our cop friends arrest Ben for the next few months, because he’s making me eat all this healthy crap from nutrition links my obstetrician sent him.”

“The man is a master cook,” Cass pointed out. “He can make tree bark tasty.”

“My hormones are doing that on their own. I swear, a handful of garden soil looks like cake to me sometimes. It’s still not ice cream and potato chips,” Marcie said darkly.

“What would you like to drink?” Athena asked her.

“Tequila, in a quart size glass.”

Athena laughed. “Ben hears you say that, he’ll have an aneurysm.”

“He keeps feeding me dark leafy greens and herring, I’ll bash his head in with his cast iron cookware and take care of that for him.”

Then her gaze went to Lawrence again, and that shadow returned. She cleared her throat, shifted her glance back to Athena.

“A Diet Coke would be great.”



Ros almost won her bet about Neil. At approximately thirteen and a half minutes from when she’d marked the start time in her head, he wandered over to her and Lawrence. Marcie had found a seat in between Savannah and Cass. The diameter of the loose circle of women, and the chatting of several ongoing dialogues, provided a good cover for a quieter conversation.

Since Neil was still active duty, on a normal weekend, he might have been in danger of being called away, but he’d had a recent shrapnel injury that had given him a short reprieve. However, despite the bandaged arm, he looked a hundred percent, active and restless. Ready to go.

Neil had proven himself a very good friend to Lawrence, more than once. That alone would earn Ros’s regard. His interest in Abby, how he’d handled it thus far, had increased that respect and affection. Which meant she didn’t make him jump through hoops to get the information he was seeking.

“I texted her a few minutes ago,” she told him before he asked. “She said she’s on her way. About twenty minutes out.”

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Abby had also aimed a few pejoratives at Ros for badgering her, but Ros decided to leave that out of her update.

Abby had already tried to back out of today's event when she heard Neil would be here. Despite that, she'd asked numerous questions about his injury. All of which told Ros and her circle that her stubborn friend needed to be here. In their various creative ways, they'd all leaned on her to ensure it.

Neil looked damn good in broken-in jeans and a T-shirt with a faded New Orleans music club logo that included a skeleton in a top hat. The olive-colored fabric stretched over his shoulders and chest. His usual bill cap, dark blue with a ragged-edged American flag patch, emphasized the directness of his gray eyes, the solid lines of his face, framed by a short beard that matched his brown hair.

"Want me to go get her?" The words were tagged by his subtle Louisiana drawl. He meant it seriously.

"I'm not sure that would be wise." Though Ros wondered if it would be. "She'll be here. She said she would."

She pinned him with a mock stern stare. "You act like you know where she lives. Or her current whereabouts. Or both. Have you put a tracker on my best friend?"

Neil's lips quirked, as Lawrence chuckled and answered for him.

"That's need to know, ma'am. Highly classified."

Lawrence had both hands resting on Ros's shoulders, his body pressed against the back of her chair, letting her feel his heat through the thin canvas covering. Nothing so pleasant to a Mistress's ego than being honored by obvious acts of devotion, but there was the additional benefit of his stroke of her collar bone, proof he'd felt the slight tension her thoughts about Abby had caused.

Max strode over, waving a hand to capture the attention of the female circle. He nodded toward the open stretch of grass next to the basketball court, where they'd left the sports equipment.

“We’re getting a tag football scrimmage going,” he said. “Who wants to play?”

“I’m in.” Cyn rose with a grin on her face, and Skye followed. Vera gestured at him with glossy nails.

“Not risking these beauties. Just had them done yesterday.”

“You’re such a girl,” Cyn told her. Vera bared her teeth at her.

“You’re butch enough for both of us, honey.”

“Dale wanted to know if you’d alternate with him as ref so he can bounce between the game and the grill,” Max told Lawrence.

“I can do that. You coming?” Lawrence asked Neil.

“Yeah. In a few minutes. Think I’ll mosey out to the parking lot.” Neil made a show of tapping his ear as if he had a communication device there. “My sources say we have an approaching VIP.”

Ros shot a short jab at his side. Neil neatly evaded, except he stepped in range of Vera, who pinched the other side, hard, with those manicured nails.

“Count yourself lucky it wasn’t your ass,” Ros said sweetly.

“Gotta watch those flank attacks with this crowd,” Lawrence told him.

Neil backed away, shooting them a wary glance. “This corner of the lawn reminds me a little too much of Fallujah.”

Lawrence flashed him a sympathetic grin, then headed for the field as Neil headed in the opposite direction.

When Cyn and Skye followed Lawrence, Ros tossed Vera a look. “Should we warn them that Cyn doesn’t know how to play a casual game of anything?”

Before she could answer, Savannah spoke up, her blue eyes twinkling. “It’s a shame Marcie can’t play. Otherwise we could have made the executive decision to put them on opposite sides, keep it even.”

“Who can’t play?” Marcie demanded, rising from the chair. “They need another person to even up the sides until Neil gets back. Ben’s still fighting fires inside. I have time before he

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emerges and decides walking is too strenuous for me. Or that I need to drink an oatmeal-puke smoothie.”

“If he comes out and sees you in the game, that’s going to go over like a lead balloon,” Cass said dryly.

Marcie stuck her tongue out at her, a little sister move that made her big sister chuckle.

Vera exchanged a look with Ros. “Good thing SEALs are refereeing. In Cyn’s world, there’s winning and death.”

“Then Savannah’s probably right about Marcie evening things up.” Cass chuckled. “Cyn and Marcie’s sparring matches at the gym are usually more brutal than the men’s.”

“Because we have to be ready to drop an opponent who might be twice our size,” Marcie said practically. “Don’t worry. I can handle Cyn.”

“That’d be a first for anyone,” Ros noted.



Abby pulled her car into a spot next to Ros’s Mustang. It looked like everyone was here. Not unexpected, since she was late. She’d changed her mind about coming ten times, and then delayed her arrival further by stopping to pick up a couple dozen beignets they wouldn’t need. Dale had said they’d have enough food to feed a battalion.

Even after receiving her box of pastries, she’d lingered at the café’s outdoor table, watching the Saturday afternoon mix of tourists and locals passing on Royal Street while she sipped her tea.

She wasn’t anti-social. Quite the contrary. She liked getting together with Ros and their group, as well as Matt and his people. This event promised plenty of fun. Athena’s place was supposed to be amazing, and she’d love to see the inside of the house and the grounds.

She knew exactly why she was dragging her feet. And when she turned off the ignition and got herself out of the car—after

ten minutes of staring at the wide field backed by pine forest across the road—she saw the reason immediately.

She had no idea when he'd gotten there, but an educated, nerve-shimmering guess put it at nine and a half minutes earlier. He'd been waiting her out. Even more significantly, it meant he'd been looking for her; he'd probably known when her car pulled in.

Her friends had nagged her to come, but Ros knew the right moment to lay off. Her last reply to Abby's "twenty minutes out, I think" text had been kind.

Okay. We're here and it's all good. I'll save you a plate.

Neil was leaning against a substantial oak. On their very first meeting, Abby's impression of him had been a tree with roots deep in the earth, making him a solid bet against any force of nature.

It was a dangerous thought for her, for so many reasons.

She'd worn jeans and a V-necked T-shirt, sneakers. Pulled her hair up in a ponytail. Light makeup, just enough to cover up the sleepless nights. She'd deliberately chosen casual, no chance of being seen as dressing up for someone. Except the shirt and jeans did fit her well. But that was just...comfortable. She was prepared for sports, since there'd been rumors of indoor bowling, football scrimmages. Swimming.

She would deny she'd spent ten minutes waffling between a modest one-piece and a far more provocative bikini she'd last worn on a girls' trip to the islands. The smooth muscled and dark-skinned Jamaican man who'd danced with her that night, his hands gripping her hips over the gauze scarf she'd tied over the bottoms, went through her mind. He'd been just the kind of submissive she most enjoyed. He respected her boundaries, let her work him out thoroughly, and brought her an easy release that left her shimmering like dawn mist.

For that reason alone, a reminder of those boundaries and what control she wanted to maintain over her life and choices, she should have brought the two-piece.

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She'd gone with the one-piece suit.

As she exited her Toyota Forerunner and opened the back-seat door to retrieve her bag, Neil straightened and came toward her. He could project a welcoming expression without smiling, his rain-colored eyes serious but warm. In his bill cap, jeans and T-shirt, with his beard, he was pure Louisiana backwater good old boy. When she visited the boat ramp park near her place, she routinely saw the type, headed out in their small bass boats to fish.

The broad shoulders, well developed arms and competent movements put him in a different category, though. The Mistress in her, well-experienced in evaluating a man's physical and mental capabilities from head to toe, saw a man who stayed in top physical condition, his mental alertness honed to a razor's edge. Both were vital parts of the arsenal of weapons he brought to his job.

"Hey," he said, once he was close enough. "Glad you could make it."

That non-smile smile made her hurt, ache and need. Because the truth was in his voice. Yes, he would have come today no matter what, because it was a get-together with his SEAL buddies, but her coming had been a major perk for him.

As he had been for her. Otherwise she wouldn't have dragged her ass to get here. Or suddenly regretted choosing the one-piece suit.

She hadn't said anything, and his gaze slid downward. She would have thought he was giving her a once-over, same as she'd just done to him, but then a corner of his lips tugged up. He closed the step between them, and dropped to one knee.

He wasn't a sub. An indisputable fact that should have made it really easy to brush him off, because she was unquestionably a Domme. Had been all her life, even if that drive seemed to be eluding her of late. She'd had other focuses, her energy dedicated to things that seemed to be draining it for anything else. When

Domme-ing at the club became more therapy than play or sex, she knew she was in trouble.

But when he knelt, a million emotions seized up inside her. Her body tightened, fully alert, like Artemis on the hunt.

His hands were on her shoe. She tipped her head to the left to see past his broad shoulder. Her shoelace had started to come undone, one strand of it longer than the other. He untied the bow and had begun to retie it when he stopped and put his hand at her waist, steadying her. Until he did that, she hadn't realized she was swaying.

"Put your hand on my shoulder," he said. "It'll help."

She touched the collar of his shirt, the fringe of soft, thick hair beneath the back of his bill cap. SEALs didn't do the high and tight, clean shaven thing, so that they could blend into local populations. She liked the rougher look on him.

She tipped the back of the hat so it tumbled forward. He caught it, put it in his back pocket, then looked up at her. He'd retied both her shoes, double knotted them efficiently.

"Is it easier, with me on my knees?" he said.

"No," she said. "I don't need you to be what you're not."

He rose, keeping his gaze on her. "Maybe being what you need *is* what I am. Have you thought of that?"

Only every freaking moment since she'd met him.

"I'm already late," she said. "I brought beignets. As well as a giant fruit tray. The strawberries look like flowers. I resort to decorative food preparation when waffling."

She had no idea why she'd said something so revealingly true yet absolutely absurd, but when his smile turned even warmer, it blasted heat on every cold part of her.

"I'll keep that in mind." Before she could tell him she'd get the tray, he'd turned, located it in her passenger seat and withdrawn it. "Got your keys?"

"Yes." The older vehicle could still be locked manually, and he'd noticed it, in that brief glance on the inside. Balancing the fruit tray in one large palm, he shifted around her to hit the

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front lock to secure the rest of the doors and closed the front one. Then he nodded toward where they were headed. “Just follow that walkway around the house. I’ll follow and watch your six.”

“Am I under some kind of threat where I need someone watching my flank?”

“Absolutely not, ma’am. I said I’d watch your six because it’s nice to look at. Like the rest of you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Give me my fruit salad.”

He lifted it above his head on tented fingers, which, with the difference in their heights, might as well have put it twenty feet in the air. She could have punched him in the side to make him drop it, but she had spent a considerable amount of time on those flowery-looking strawberries.

She tried to scowl. “Why are you teasing me?”

“Because it’s making you smile. And not look so worried about being here.” He took another step closer, enough so the tray was a spot of shade over them. “I’m glad you came.”

“I can’t be anything to you. You get that, right?” But there was a note to her voice that gave away that she wasn’t entirely happy about that. Then her focus changed, sharpened. “Why are you lifting the tray with that hand?”

He’d used the injured arm, which was obviously his dominant one.

“It’s okay,” he said. “The bandage is just to protect it. I’m cleared for duty as of Monday, but that’s a formality. I’m ready to go now if needed.”

She’d rested her hand on his side below the raised arm when she scolded him, her fingers curled there like she would tug his arm down with that hold. Had he purposefully reminded her of his active status? If so, it had served its purpose, damn it. Her traitorous mind was already rationalizing that it was safe to spend time with him, because he wouldn’t be here long.

“Well, you should take better care not to aggravate it,” she

said, with more heat than fit the moment. “To be sure it will be a hundred percent when you really need it.”

“Abby.”

“I can’t do this,” she said, dropping her hand away from him. She forced herself to keep her voice steady, her eyes and mouth resolute. Easier said than done, with his gaze lingering on her lips. “I need you to get that, even if my head and body aren’t cooperating with the truth. Just...let’s go join the others and all have a good time at the party. Okay?”

She pivoted and walked away before he could answer. There was nothing he could say that would change anything. No matter if her heart wasn’t any more on board with it than the rest of her, her mind was a genetic time bomb. She wasn’t going to inflict it on anyone.



The tag football scrimmage ended up being a three-on-three affair. Cyn, Lucas and Peter versus Marcie, Max and Skye. Dale and Lawrence alternated moving up and down the field, refereeing. The women relocated their chairs to the side of the field, making their peanut gallery commentary and not-so-helpful or sportsmanlike suggestions easier to deliver. Matt joined them there, taking the sturdy wooden Adirondack chair near his wife and stretching out his long legs. The plan was for him to join in when Neil returned—if he arrived before it was time to eat—and it could become a four-on-four playing field.

While Ros heard some debate on whether Skye and Marcie would be able to carry the weight against a team with two formidably-sized men and the cutthroat Cyn, she had no qualms about it herself. Even pregnant, Marcie’s fighting skills and hand to eye coordination, as well as a background in gymnastics, made her Cyn’s equal. Whereas Skye routinely had to plan two steps ahead, to ensure her disability didn’t put any obstacles in her path. That, plus her mild addiction to first person shooter video

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games, meant she had tactical skills on the field that meshed well with Max's. At least in this environment.

Cass's sportscast style play-by-play commentary for Dana was sending peals of laughter through the group. "Max hands off to Skye, who nimbly ducks under Peter's Neanderthal grab and dashes down field with it, Cyn hot on her heels..."

The determined set to Cyn's face said she'd be ripping off Skye's tag, come hell or high water.

"Go, go, go!" Dana danced by her chair.

"Oh, Peter comes in from the left and almost tags Skye, but now the ball's passed to the woman with a bun in the oven. She's headed for the touchdown like it's chocolate cake with ice cream and only the first person there gets any...but Cyn's got her...no, she doesn't. Marcie finds a burst of speed and...touchdown!"

The audience burst into whooping cheers. No one seemed to be taking sides, rooting for whoever had the ball. Probably a result of the teams being a mix.

"And Cyn taunts the opposing team with a certain finger gesture and a creative insult to the quarterback's parentage..." Cass intoned.

"That's our girl," Vera said, amused.

Ros shot Matt a droll look. "If we'd done this TRA versus K&A, we could have done some betting."

"Who says we can't anyway," he responded, his brown eyes twinkling. He had his arm along the back of Savannah's chair as he balanced a beer in the other grip. He was wearing faded jeans that drew the female gaze to his long legs, and he had a cowboy boot that looked like it had been used to do actual ranch work propped on the bottom rung of Savannah's chair. "We bet on anything. Winnings go to the victor's favorite charity."

"Which side do you want? You have people on both."

"You choose. Ladies first."

"Okay. Team Cyn, Peter and Lucas. Five hundred that they'll be ahead by..." She looked toward Athena. "When does dinner start? When my team is ahead, right?"

Athena laughed. "We'll keep it fair." She checked her watch. "Thirty minutes."

Matt considered, took out his phone, looked at it. Then he nodded. "That'll work. I'm good backing Marcie, Skye and Max."

Ros gave him a suspicious look. "What was that?"

He grinned. "Based on his texts to me, I'm estimating Ben needs about ten more minutes on his legal snarl. When he emerges, he'll take Marcie out of the game. In turn, she'll strategically maneuver him into taking her place." His brown eyes glinted again. "I never bet against Ben, and with Max and Skye, they'll be unbeatable."

"Big talk." Vera scoffed. "Okay, I'll take that action, too. First, because we know Cyn, but also because I've heard through the grapevine there's one force that can stop your lawyer, physically that is." Vera nodded toward Peter. "And he's it."

"If this was a tackle football game," Matt said, "you'd be correct. But it's not."

A *thunk* followed by a grunt drew their attention back to the field. Peter had just executed a sidestep in front of Max where the two men collided like a pair of brick walls. It gave Cyn the ability to leap over them both and achieve a touchdown, evening the score.

More cheers, and Vera shot Matt a satisfied look. "That's okay, Max honey," Dana called out. "Shake it off. Tag me in, I'll come kick my captain's ass."

She squealed with laughter as Peter dashed off field, doing a run-by to grab her up and toss her over his shoulder. He swung her in a circle before he sat her back down on her feet with a slap on the ass that demonstrated excellent aim and technique.

Cass was right. Peter had a lot of regular practice.

Dana grabbed the belt loops of his jeans, an unshakable burr whose tenacity he rewarded with a heated kiss, while he cupped her face with tender devotion. Then he was headed back to the field, giving Max a shove when he got there.

Matt left his chair to do a huddle with the team he was back-

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ing. Vera cocked her head, studying Peter and Max where they stood together. “You know,” she said. “Watching these fine-looking males, I could come up with some man-on-man ideas that would make this army of straight men blanch.”

Ros debated whether she should challenge Matt’s coaching as an unfair advantage. However, that would suggest his coaching would make a difference, an acknowledgement she wasn’t going to give him. Cyn, Peter and Lucas were already in deep consultation, after all.

Plus, this conversation was too intriguing to disrupt.

Cass had done a mock fan of herself at Vera’s thought, encouraging more laughter, while Dana added her two cents. “If you only knew how often we’ve teased them about that. Marcie wants her friend Celeste, who’s a writer, to do slash fiction. Just for us personally, featuring our favorite fantasy pairing.”

“And who would that be?” Ros wanted to know.

Janet pointed a finger toward Cass. “Ask her.”

“You were the one who initially brought it up at our monthly dinners,” Cass rejoined.

“But we all agreed with your assessment. I can’t discuss such things without endangering my employment NDA.”

Savannah snorted. “There is no clause in your NDA prohibiting the discussion of sexual fantasies with executive team wives.”

“Of course there is. Section 4, Item 3,” Janet responded without a blink.

“I’d like to see that language,” Vera said.

Janet winked, but then nodded to Cass. “Spill. Matt may have the intimidating pack leader, head of the family thing going on, but I know you can take the heat. You’ve stood toe to toe with the lot of them in the board room. Tell Ros and Vera how you imagined it.”

Cass sighed but relented. “As a college flashback piece. Because Matt and Lucas were roommates.”

“Matt and Lucas?” Ros sent an appreciative look out to the

field. The huddle had broken up and Matt and Lucas were conveniently standing near one another. Lucas was an amateur cyclist and had a muscular, wiry physique that went well with his dirty blond, currently unruly hair, aristocratic nose and clear silver-gray eyes. His ass was tight enough to repel bullets, his biceps smooth iron curves beneath a snug long-sleeved shirt with a cyclist marathon logo on it.

“It starts in the showers,” Cass mused. “The two of them bantering, somewhat like they seem to be doing now. Two men letting off steam, then just getting each other off.”

“So no real topping of one another?” Ros put in.

“That’s where I get stuck,” Cass said, with a dreamy smile. “We all do. They’re our Doms. We can’t even imagine them being topped, or want to.”

“Which is why I go a totally different way with it,” Dana said. “For me it’s all menage fantasy.”

“Sandwich time,” Cass observed. “But no surprise there. You’ve had the actual pleasure.”

“Really? Who?” Vera sat straight upright. At Dana’s look, she put three fingers in the air. “Won’t leave this circle. Scout’s honor. Unless I need to bribe Cyn or Skye with the information to get them to do me a favor.” She flashed a grin. “But they won’t tell anyone, either.”

“I’ll vouch for that,” Ros said. “Club rules apply.”

Discretion was everything in the BDSM community, so she understood Dana’s prudence. Therefore, despite the tone of the conversation, Ros let Dana hear the seriousness in her voice as she invoked the creed all Club Progeny members followed.

Dana nodded with dignity, acknowledging it, then relinquished the information with a playful smile. “Peter and Ben,” she said. “A total one-off, but that was good, because one time nearly killed me. It was a very rare exception. A gift from my Dom,” she clarified. “These guys might share within the circle, but they don’t *share*, if you know what I mean.”

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“I do,” Ros said, trading a look with Vera. Another thing the K&A and TRA teams had in common, apparently.

All of her women considered Lawrence “theirs,” in terms of protection and love, but his heart, body and soul were Ros’s alone to command.

“How about you, Ros?” Cass asked. “Have you ever considered a threesome from the Domme side?”

Ros grinned. “Two men at my command? Without a doubt. If Celeste ever wants to contact me for some anonymous contributions, I could supply some nice capture fantasy material. Two men chained up, at my mercy...”

Matt was walking back toward their group, and apparently was close enough to overhear the last part. A pained look crossed his face and he pivoted, heading back toward Dale, reducing them all to laughter again.

“This is exactly why we need to do things like this more often,” Athena said. “When it’s informal, but everyone knows everyone else is part of the kink world, we can tease, play...” She nudged Ros with a smile. “The subs can ask the big bad Dommies questions. Like what *your* fantasies are.”

“And how the hell do you actually use those giant butt plugs they sell in the Progeny gift shop?” Dana put in. “Do you just eyeball it and think, ‘I can *make* this fit,’ or what?”

Vera spewed her drink in a fine mist as the group cracked up. Dana managed an innocent, “what did I say look?” that just kept it going.

Ros checked the friend tracking app on her phone. Abby had arrived fifteen minutes ago. She would have wondered why she hadn’t joined the group, but Neil hadn’t come back, either.

Vera could see her phone, and when Ros lifted her gaze Vera raised a silken brow. One could only wait and see on these things. And worry. But neither one of them was going to do a thing to interrupt whatever was going on in the front of the house

“Oh, here we go.” Cass began her commentary again. “We’re

back in play after a brief strategy consultation. Oh, Marcie feints and avoids Neil's grab, no, he's got her tag, no, with her lightning hands, she got the ball to Skye first, oh, no, interception!"

A quick hitch to her voice, her body jacking up from the chair, drew everyone's attention. The interception had come from Marcie and Cyn colliding, with enough impact that Marcie stumbled and went down.

Cyn had popped the ball out to Peter. He took possession, and could easily have charged down the field to make the touchdown that pulled them ahead of the opposing team. Instead, every man on the field had stopped short.

Fortunately, they all saw in an instant that Marcie's teeth were bared, eyes lit in a smile, as she rolled back to her knees.

Cyn's protective instincts had kicked in during the contact, no surprise to Ros. She'd caught Marcie as they fell, using her own lean body to buffer her sparring partner from what would have been a hard impact with the ground. Their primary account manager would have some bruises tomorrow.

Which didn't mean a damn to Marcie's husband, who'd emerged from the house at the unfortunate right moment to see the fall. Ben was headed that way with a dark scowl on his face.

Despite Marcie's smile, she had her hand on Cyn's arm as she moved toward the sidelines. Lucas was on her other side, and Marcie was saying something to him, a reassurance, Ros was sure. She was waving him off, all of them. He paused, but when he glanced Ben's way and back to Marcie, it was clear he understood she wanted to handle this one herself.

The others followed Lucas's lead, moving back to the field to take the attention away from whatever Marcie and Ben might need to hash out. However, Ros noticed Lawrence drifting closer to Marcie. Probably because Cyn hadn't taken the same hint as the others. She'd held her ground, her attention shifting between Marcie and the incoming Ben.

Lawrence stepped closer to Cyn, said something. She looked at him, as Marcie added a few words and another smile to the

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exchange. With an irritable shrug, Cyn relented, backpedaling toward the other players.

Ros let out a breath. Cyn thinking she needed to be there to stand Ben down if he got too worked up would be throwing gasoline on a fire. Whereas Lawrence was good at working a problem in a way that kept everyone on an even keel.

Cyn knew that. Lawrence and her ladies had gotten to know one another pretty well since he'd come into their lives. As such, Cyn trusted his judgment. She also had useful moments when she understood herself well enough to know when she needed to step back. This was one of them.

Protective and gallant as every man on the field was, they'd all given the women an advantage in their contact with them. It made sense that only Cyn, her regular sparring partner, or Skye, would cause Marcie a tumble. Ros expected Lawrence intended to get that to register on Ben's radar, if needed to defuse things. Since Lawrence had been refereeing, he could offer the observation with authority.

Matt returned to his chair by Savannah. He put his hand over hers. "He's fine," he said. "They both are."

"I know," she said serenely. "Marcie knows him better than anyone."

"Which makes me question why she went on the field in the first place," her husband said.

"Because, just like when I was pregnant, she knows there's a balance between having a care for the worries of the man she loves, and helping him understand she has the brain cells to make good decisions about the life she's carrying. A life which means every bit as much to her as it does to him."

"But he has a worry she doesn't." Matt kissed her knuckles and gave her a direct look. "About her well-being, because without her, his whole world ends."

Her gaze softened on him. Then she looked back at the field, and her lips tipped up in a rueful smile.

Ros followed her glance. Just as Matt had predicted, what-

ever conversation had occurred between Marcie and Ben now had him leaving her side to take his wife's place on the team. Lawrence was standing a couple feet from her, close enough Ros knew he'd been part of whatever conversation they'd had. The look he sent her confirmed everything was good. He sent the same message toward Cyn, which eased her shoulders.

Athena shook her head, chuckling at Matt. "You were right about Ben coming onto the team," she said. "Predator of the Bayou. Isn't that what the business columns call you?"

"Just good forecasting," Matt said, unruffled. "Like weathermen."

"Weren't they a 1970s terrorist group?" Dana asked.



Lawrence had stayed at a polite distance when Ben reached Marcie, but picking up on the emotions between them, he managed to drift close enough to hear part of the conversation. Ben had a hand on her shoulder, one on her waist, and was bent close, their faces only inches apart.

"You can defy me on some things, but not on this shit," Ben said to her. "Don't do that to me."

Lawrence noted she was still somewhat out of breath, and she had taken advantage of Cyn's support to come off the field. So Ben's concern might not be totally unfounded. But she shook her head, and when she spoke, she was calm, sure of herself. "It's just body changes, me adjusting to them. I wasn't expecting to tire out that quick. I wanted to play. You know, women have plowed fields right up until they're ready to drop a baby, right into the corn furrow."

"Yeah, and I'm sure that was a really great idea. Mortality rates at that time..." Ben stopped himself, swallowed it back. When he straightened, Lawrence recognized the emotions on his face. Not anger; frustration and worry. Marcie was aware,

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too. It was in how she grasped his large hand in one of hers, and reached up to touch his face.

“It’s okay. We’ve talked about this. You can’t get crazy on me, all right? I’m only a few months along,” she reminded him. “Plus I was a team advantage. Peter and Lucas were giving me such a wide berth I could have run the ball right between them. And Cyn actually caught me as I went down, cushioned my fall. Even she won’t play rough with me right now. On a normal day, she would have aerated the lawn with my face.”

A muscle flexed in Ben’s jaw. “Marcella.”

There was exasperated admonishment in Ben’s use of her full name, but also a tangle of emotions. All of which meant love. Lawrence couldn’t miss it. He doubted anyone could. K&A’s lethal lawyer was over the moon for his young wife.

“I’m okay,” she repeated, in a murmur. “Really. Exercise is really good for me. The doctor said so. But I’ll go sit down. With one condition. You have to take my place.”

Her blue eyes sparkled as she issued the mandate, though Lawrence suspected the effort to lighten his mood was taking more emotional energy than she was revealing. From the way Ben’s hands shifted to her waist now, to take a firm, supportive hold on her, he knew it, too.

“I know you’ll fight as dirty as Cyn,” she told him. “Matt has his money on our team. Go play. Have fun. We’re holding up the game.”

Ben closed his arms around her, enveloping her against his larger frame. “You are the biggest pain in my ass.”

Marcie rested her forehead briefly on his chest. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

Ben eased back with a sigh. When Marcie glanced Lawrence’s way, she surprised him with a meaningful look, one not hard to decipher. He stepped up to them, clearing his throat.

“Dale’s refereeing this next play,” he said. “I’ll walk her back to her chair.”

“Have you met Lawrence?” Marcie asked her husband brightly.

Ben held her gaze a long additional minute, a clear message he wasn't going to be handled, before he turned to face Lawrence. He had eyes like hard emeralds, and the looks of a fallen angel meant for trouble. After sweeping Lawrence with a cool glance, he extended his hand. “Nice to meet you face to face at last. Heard...good things from Matt. And from Marcie.”

Lawrence accepted the hand clasp with a sense of relief. Though he'd told Rosalinda he couldn't talk about the situation, he knew Matt's inner circle had been read into it. First because it was Ben and Peter's wives that were intimately involved. Second, because Matt would want them prepped in case the potential fallout ever happened. Since Ben was their lawyer, that went double for him.

He'd expected Ben to be a lot colder to him as a result. But he should have known better. Max had told him Ben and Peter understood sometimes a bad situation couldn't be avoided; it just had to be dealt with. They also knew their wives; they were married to kickass women who didn't back down from a fight. Case in point: Marcie had stood up to his formidable will, even when it preceded Ben across the field like a thundercloud. Even now she was smiling at him, while he gazed down at her with that same tender reproof.

“Right to the chair,” Ben told her.

She linked arms with Lawrence. “He won't let me trip over a stone. Be sure and knock Cyn on her ass for me.”

Ben shook his head. “I can't drop a girl. I'm going to draft in Dana if it comes to that. She'll be the one plowing Cyn's face into the lawn.”

A memory went through Lawrence's head, a flashback to the controversial day in question. Dana gripping the hand of the cartel thug who'd grabbed her, executing a smooth twist that broke his wrist and following up with a punch to the head and

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gut that had taken him down. Even blind and weighing barely over a hundred pounds, the woman was a force to reckon with.

“If I let them get close enough to touch me, they’ve given me about three points of reference,” she’d told him later. *“I just have to hit them pretty fast. My window of opportunity is really fucking small.”*

“You know, the guys could play shirtless,” Marcie was still teasing her husband.

Ben lifted a brow. “Only if the girls agree to do the same.”

“Propose that to Cyn and let me know how it goes.” She grinned.

With a chuckle that proved equilibrium had been restored between them, Ben headed onto the field with the other players. Lawrence met Marcie’s gaze squarely, probably for the first time since they’d arrived. She was as aware of that as he was. “Hi,” she said. She’d withdrawn her hand from Lawrence’s arm after Ben moved away. That stung Lawrence a little more than expected, but he got it.

A look of frustration crossed her visage, and she shook her head. “I see Dale and Max all the time. It’s stupid to feel strange around you and Neil. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not stupid,” he told her. “Or strange at all. You associate me and Neil specifically with that day, whereas Dale and Max are part of your daily life.”

“True.” She took a breath. “Give me your arm again. I don’t need it, but it will make him feel better.”

When he complied, she slid her hand into the crook of his elbow and smiled, an easier gesture this time. As they proceeded toward the sidelines, following the perimeter of the field, she sent him a glance. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She stopped, faced him. “It was a little tough right after, I don’t deny it. But I haven’t had a single moment of regret. So don’t worry about that. You look worried.”

“That’s for your husband. I figure my life is over if you stub

your toe. I'm hoping you're more graceful than you appeared when Cyn took you down."

She sputtered and jabbed an elbow in his ribs. He grinned, glad his teasing eased some of the tension he still sensed in her. But then she sobered and lifted a shoulder. "Savannah had a really rough labor with Angelica. Matt almost lost her and the baby. Ben worries a lot."

Until now, he hadn't thought about how that would influence Ben's behavior, but he should have. Matt and his friends were as close as a SEAL team. What happened to one impacted all.

A couple nights after Savannah's labor had happened, he, Neil and Max had gotten together at Dale's. Max had been responsible for getting Savannah to the hospital when things went really bad for her and her pregnancy.

When Max had told them about it, Lawrence had seen a tremor in Max's fingers, heard a break in his voice. Things Max had never displayed, in far worse situations. But dealing with things down range was one thing. Doing it on your home ground, when family lives were at stake, was a whole different level of suck.

Thinking of that, as well as the dangerous things that had brought him and Rosalinda together, Lawrence put a hand over Marcie's. "You'd be too much for any man to lose. Can't blame Ben for being protective."

Her blue eyes warmed. "I get it. I do. But if I let him have his way, my muscles will atrophy from lack of use. And I have a feeling this kid is going to be the kind of handful that requires full strength from day one."

Her gaze softened again as she looked toward Ben, who got clobbered looking her direction and lost the play, to the groans of the rest of his team. "Oops. They'll kick him off the field for that one."

"He doesn't like leaving you in the hands of another man."

She acknowledged it with another smile. As they approached the observers, she chuckled, nodding toward where Rosalinda,

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Savannah and Athena were engaged in some kind of absorbing discussion, with lots of hand gestures and laughter. “That’s the terrifying corporate power women corner, for sure. So, are you and Ros going to get married?”

He was the one who tripped. Over his own feet, no less. Marcie helped steady him, laughing outright at the look on his face. “Cass taught me that one. Negotiating tactic. Catch them off guard.”

“You are trouble,” he said. Her laughter, the light in her blue eyes, the way her blond hair waved around her delicate face, including that stubborn chin? Those things didn’t hint at how enchanting and exasperating she was—they broadcast it. It made total sense that the man who loved her to distraction was out of his head worrying for her.

Rosalinda said Lawrence was too protective, but when you loved someone, and you knew how many things could go wrong in the world, it didn’t seem possible to be too protective. Especially when your love for that person seemed to grow stronger and deeper every day.

He hadn’t intended to answer Marcie’s question, assuming she’d asked it to tease him, but when he looked toward Rosalinda, he found himself answering it. As if the universe had asked, not just a curious and precocious young woman.

“It kind of feels like we already are. But if my Mistress decides she wants another way to call me hers, I’m all for it.”

Marcie’s fingers tightened on his, showing her appreciation for his bald honesty. He’d called Rosalinda by the name that covered every level of what she was to him, and Marcie’s expression said she understood that feeling very well, too. But she kept her tone light.

“Oh, so she’d do the proposing?”

Lawrence smiled wryly. “I can’t imagine she’d want it any other way.”

Marcie dimpled. “Good answer.”

When he delivered her to the empty chair next to Cass, Cass gave her a look. Marcie rolled her eyes. "I know, I know."

"Told you."

"Doesn't mean me playing wasn't the right call," Marcie retorted. "Being surrounded by a sea of uber-Doms means a constant fight for self-determination."

"It's not a Dom/sub thing." Rosalinda sent an amused look toward Matt. "You and Dale are far too hovering when it comes to me and my ladies at the club."

"It's a man's job to protect and cherish women," Matt said comfortably, taking another swallow of his beer. He glanced toward Savannah, his gaze lingering on her face. "Particularly the exceptionally strong ones, like his queen."

"Oh, he's good," Vera said.

Savannah smiled, poking Matt in the side. "His rare flashes of charm are one of his most irritating traits."

Matt shot her a rakish grin as he captured and lifted her hand, kissed her knuckles once more. When he adjusted his mouth to tease the pulse in her wrist, she lost focus. Then recovered to jab him in the side again, creating another ripple of chuckles through the group.

"That overprotectiveness isn't just a Dom thing," Vera put in, shooting a look toward Lawrence. "The malady seems to infect very alpha subs as well."

"Well, if you'd all be more reasonable and stop taking risks, maybe we wouldn't feel the need," he pointed out.

"Oh yeah," Marcie said. "Like walking out our door every morning." She gave a mock shudder.

"Don't forget, having a job," Rosalinda added. "Or interacting with people who haven't received a top security clearance and full background check. Like my 83-year-old neighbor who spends her every waking moment gardening."

"See?" Lawrence nodded. "Reasonable precautions."

He chuckled as he was pelted with tart comments and

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backed away, hands lifted. “I better get back in there. Dale is going to need reinforcements with Cyn and Ben in the mix.”

“Good call. Whoever said that boys play dirtier never played with girls.” Cass winked.

Before he turned to rejoin the game, Lawrence looked toward his Mistress one more time. He scored on the timing, because she met his look with one full of promise. The sensual awareness of her deceptively relaxed body language confirmed her thoughts were running along the same lines as his.

When it came to his Mistress, he had no problem with a girl playing dirty.



Neil and Abby finally appeared in the backyard. Ros knew she wasn't the only one who logged how they walked and talked together, the eloquent body language. Neil had that leaning forward posture that suggested she had his full attention. Whereas she had that studying look that Abby did when she was turning over about eighty thoughts, deciding which way to go on a problem or an opportunity. Ros expected what was going on in her friend's mind right now was like standing inside a tornado.

Abby peeled off from him, gesturing toward the scrimmage in a manner somewhere between friendly encouragement and firm dismissal. When Neil stopped to watch her go, Ros was impressed by his complete lack of self-consciousness. He didn't care who saw his intent regard.

Ros could tell Abby was aware he was looking. And probably fighting not to turn around. Ros didn't mind screwing with that, so when her friend reached her and Ros rose to put an arm around her neck and give her a quick hug and kiss hello, she murmured in her ear.

“Yep. He's still looking at you.”

“Shut up.”

Ros grinned. Abby and Neil's timing was good, as the game was called on a tie, the grilled meat ready. Athena drafted Lawrence's help to lay out the last items on the buffet table, which was heaped up with burgers, steak, vegetable shish kebabs, baked beans, corn, macaroni salad and several other dishes Ros couldn't even imagine fitting on her plate, even with a couple returns to the table. A half dozen desserts also waited on an adjacent, smaller table. They included a bunch of cupcakes with a light ivory frosting sprinkled with cinnamon. Ben had made them, and according to Marcie's explanation, the center of the melt-in-your-mouth white cake was some kind of cream cheese filling that caused a state of instant bliss.

Athena waved a polite hand to draw their attention from the banter and the food. "Don't worry, there won't be any waste. We box up the remainder and take it down to the rec center. The kids there don't always have a lot at home, so they make short work of it."

She smiled at Matt. "Something I know you're well aware of, since K&A helped fund a shelter addition last year."

"We had to make sure Ben had a decent place to go when Marcie kicks him out," Peter said.

Ros gave Matt a nudge, as they were moving along the buffet side by side. "We didn't get a resolution to our bet."

"No worries," he said. "There'll be plenty of other opportunities. Pool games, basketball."

"Plus there's an arcade room," Neil supplied from the other side of the table. Ros noted he'd strategically inserted himself in the line next to Abby. "Along with pool tables."

"I vote for pool games," Dana said. "Pool volleyball. Or Marco Polo. I'm a champion at being Marco."

"Try the macaroni salad," Neil told Abby, pointing to it. "Lynn, Athena's cook, makes some of the best."

"How much money would it take to lure her over to my house?" Savannah asked. She'd sampled one of the croissants she'd put on her plate, and lifted a piece to Matt's mouth as he leaned over her shoulder to take a taste. He closed his

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mouth over her fingers, earning a flash of heat from his wife's eyes.

"Don't even think it." Athena pointed a warning finger at Savannah. "You go after my cook and housekeeper, I'll set fire to that gorgeous arbor you just added to your backyard."

"Didn't Dale build that for them?" Max asked, tucking his tongue in his cheek.

"He did," Janet filled in. She was comfortably close to Max, her backside brushing his hip and thigh. He retrieved a yeast roll for her plate, using his longer reach to snag it from its basket across the table. She sent him an appreciative look, even as she added, "Savannah loves reading to Angelica under it. Matt would just write another check to replace it, so it's a win-win for Athena's bottom line."

"So much for employee loyalty," Matt observed, shooting his admin a look filled with the mock threat.

Dale shook his head and squeezed his wife's waist. "This is what I get for associating with corporate sharks."

"They pay well," Lawrence said practically, giving Ros a nudge and a smile. "But who's setting the fire to the arbor? That's what I want to know."

Athena blinked guilelessly at him. "Didn't you say you'd do *anything* for Lynn's cookies?"

Laughter swept the group, increasing exponentially as Ros leveled a pointed look at him. "Anything?"



The banter continued throughout the line and then carried over to the several picnic tables Athena and Dale had grouped under a cluster of nearby oak trees. Afterward, the party moved to the heated indoor pool.

Because it was hardly the first time she'd hosted gatherings at her home, accommodating even more guests than those here today, Athena had two changing rooms adjacent to the pool

house, one for either gender. The changing rooms were outfitted with showers and lockers.

As Lawrence emerged from the men's room with Neil on one side and Max on the other, they surveyed those clustered around the pool. Dale and Matt were already implementing the idea to set up a pool volleyball net. Others had settled in with cocktails, some already in the heated water or letting their feet dangle in as they sat on the side. Lawrence saw Ben was one of those, Marcie in the water and comfortably relaxed inside the spread of his knees, his hand curled in her already wet hair.

She smiled at Lawrence and gestured with her fruity drink, probably some virgin mix Athena had whipped up for her. Athena was a great bartender. It was a job she'd done in college. Though she'd come from money, her parents had wanted her to understand the value of earning her way.

Neil muttered a reverent curse. "This is where the men get separated from the boys. Serious test of iron dick control."

The indoor pool area was overflowing with beautiful women in bikinis or very well-fitted one-pieces. Though she wasn't swimming today because of the new tattoo on her elegant back, Lawrence's Mistress wore that tiny blue two piece he'd picked out. It had dangly strings with wooden beads. When she'd given him the choice from her available swimwear, she'd obviously intended to torture him with that decision. Talk about giving a guy enough rope to hang himself.

The light silk wrap she wore over it was draped behind her as she reclined on her hip on a lounge chair and chatted with Vera, Abby and Cass. Her fabulous legs were half bent and angled so he could follow their tempting lengths up to the curves of her even more tempting ass, accentuated by the rise of the bikini bottoms.

His own dick control wasn't the only issue. Yeah, he could enjoy the hell out of looking at her, but so could every other male. Kind of a catch-22. At least he trusted everyone here, even if he didn't care much for the fact they'd be looking.

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It was hard not to look, though. You couldn't be a straight male and not appreciate the view. Dana's pixie physique and the high set of her toned ass were as much a pleasure to look at as Marcie's full breasts and softening curves. Vera had a goddess's lush figure and Cyn was a battle warrior in the video game of a teenager boy's best fantasies. On that same note, in black silky swim shorts and purple top that picked up the same color she'd worked into her spiky, mostly blond hair today, Skye reminded him of Tracer, an Overwatch character. Neil had liked playing the game when they were on extended deployment.

His Mistress worked with some damn good-looking women.

Then there were Savannah and Cass, who reminded him of a pair of vintage starlets, lots of milky skin showing as they discussed their latest movie option poolside at their sunny Malibu mansion.

Rosalinda put her feet on the ground, sitting up so she could shrug off the robe. Since she was turned toward Abby, Lawrence could see the tattoo, the etched motto of *The only easy day was yesterday* surrounded by blue roses. So could Max and Neil.

"Is that new?" Max asked.

"Nope," Neil said before Lawrence could. "It was for the last SEAL she dated."

He fended off Lawrence's punch, but also shot him a more serious look. "That's a good woman you have there. Just what you need. A total ball buster."

"Aren't they all?" Max said, gazing fondly at Janet. Her hair was in a loose knot on top of her head, and she wore a butter yellow swimsuit that flattered her dancer's figure. She'd paired the suit with flowing green pants in a sheer fabric.

Then Max gave Lawrence a faint smile and subtle nudge, drawing his eyes toward Neil. Despite their SEAL brother's snarky comment, his attention hadn't strayed far from one specific woman.

Though Rosalinda would always be the most beautiful woman in Lawrence's eyes, now and forever, there was no

arguing that Abigail Rose had the type of looks that would cause traffic pile-ups. Red hair, cat-shaped hazel eyes, and a body curved in all the right ways, if a little underweight, to Lawrence's way of thinking. He'd noticed Abby hadn't put much on her plate, but he already knew, from regular exposure to the women of Rosalinda's inner circle, that Abby had a fickle appetite.

She wasn't too skinny though. She filled out the one piece she wore in a way that made a man itch to touch. A man like his brother-in-arms next to him. Neil's hands were slightly curled, as if he were imagining it.

"Christ. They're the female version of Matt's team," Max said.

"What do you mean?" Neil asked.

"In NOLA business circles, they say sending a straight woman to a K&A meeting is hopeless, if you want her to hold her own. There are exceptions. Case in point." Max nodded toward Cass and Savannah. "But I get what they're saying. Can't imagine a guy keeping anything in his head when Ros and her ladies turn on those vibes."

"Or even if they don't. The similarities go beyond that, though." Lawrence scanned the group. With them scattered and mingled, it made it even easier to observe. "Same total awareness of what's happening around them, that in-depth way of evaluating each person."

"Just the kind of thing you'd expect from a group of Doms," Neil said.

When Lawrence and Max both looked at him, he shrugged. "I'm not some backwoods hillbilly that doesn't know shit about the world, you know." He glanced at Max. "You've told us what Matt and his team are. Then Lawrence told me what Ros is, up front. It wasn't a far leap to figure Max here is with the same kind of woman. I watch your backs, so I learned enough. And I'm good with you two talking about it. Same way I'm good if you don't want to."

Lawrence exchanged a look with Max. While Janet was a

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Mistress, Max definitely wasn't a sub. He and Janet had simply figured out something that worked for them. However, Lawrence definitely craved his Mistress's dominance, which wasn't something he really cared to chat about with other men. So he appreciated Neil's way of handling it.

But he also wondered if Neil's attitude was more than that. He had to have deduced Abby was a Domme. Neil was even less likely to take on the submissive role, in the bedroom or anywhere else, than Max was. And yet Neil's interest in her only seemed to be intensifying.

Neil also wasn't the kind of dick who'd assume all a Domme needed was the right guy to "make" her change her stripes. Lawrence had already assured Rosalinda on that score when she asked him about it.

But he had to admit he wasn't sure how his friend was envisioning this happening. They'd save it for a future conversation during one of their workouts, though. Right now, Lawrence wanted to get close enough to his Mistress to run a fingertip along her silky skin. She liked it when he did that, particularly along her shoulder to the base of her neck.

But he didn't want to stop there. He wanted to get way closer. In between those long legs close.

Not a good thought for that impulse control Neil had mentioned. So Lawrence put it aside and decided to grab her a bottle of water from the snack table. She didn't usually drink more than two glasses of wine before she switched to the H₂O.

He offered Neil some parting advice. "Abby prefers diet Dr Pepper. She doesn't drink."

"Roger that."

Max dipped his head toward Lawrence. "Hey, maybe we talk the more competitive girls into a chicken fight later."

"If Munch plays," Neil said, using Lawrence's team nickname, "We'll have to stay in the shallows. Or his head will be below the surface and he'll drown."

"If we put Dana on his shoulders, together they might be just

as tall as you or me,” Max agreed. “That way, if none of the other women want to play, you and I wouldn’t need anyone on our shoulders to make it an even match.”

“You two could be a comedy duo if you were actually funny,” Lawrence said.

Athena’s phone chimed, and when she glanced at it, a smile wreathed her face. “Jon and Rachel have finally arrived.” She rose from her chair, wrapping a towel around her lower half since she was still damp from her first foray into the pool. As she hurried toward the pool exit, she passed Lawrence, giving his arm an affectionate squeeze. “Don’t let your Master Chief eat all those bacon-wrapped pork rinds off the table while I’m gone. His doctor said he takes in too much salt.”

“He has to balance being married to the sweetest woman in New Orleans,” Lawrence said, earning her laughter as she disappeared out the sliding glass door.

Though he’d never met Rachel, Lawrence knew from Max that she was about thirteen years older than Jon and both of them were bigtime into yoga. In addition to her main job as a physical therapist, Rachel even taught classes at her own rented studio.

Max had mentioned that Rachel had golden hair and large blue eyes. As his gaze coursed over the women present, Lawrence deduced at least four of the Kensington guys had a thing for blondes, obviously.

His attention moved to his Mistress. He guessed he could say the same. She wasn’t a natural blonde, but she dyed her hair that way, with dark tips on the blunt ends that curled in at her shoulders. He liked it, but her hair color wasn’t what drew him to her. Not even close.

Of course, hot as Savannah, Cass, Marcie and probably Rachel were, he expected the same was true for Ben, Jon, Matt and Lucas.

He picked up the bottle of water and turned back toward his Mistress. He was looking forward to the brush of her hand,

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taking the bottle from his. As he thought of how such a simple thing could give him pleasure, he smiled.

No, the hair color didn't matter.



When Max, Neil and Lawrence came out of the pool's locker room, they wore T-shirts over their swim shorts. In Neil's case, it was the same bar shirt he'd worn with his jeans. Ros expected they'd take off the shirts once they went into the pool, so she was right there with Dana, wanting that to happen sooner rather than later. When Lawrence found her in her lounge chair, she noted the way his gaze traveled hungrily over her. It made her glad she'd decided to drape the robe in a manner to inspire that appetite.

He'd been headed her way, but then her man got waylaid by Dale, seeking his help to relocate the snack table next to one of the sliding door accesses on the left side of the pool house. By the time they'd re-positioned it, a new set of voices alerted them all to the return of Athena, with Jon and Rachel. As they came in through the front entrance of the building, Dana had risen from her lounge, using her cane to head in their direction.

The way the petite black woman put her arms around the taller blonde, holding for an extra minute, it was clear she and Rachel had a particularly close relationship among the already tightly bonded K&A women. Dana said something that had Rachel laughing and Jon smiling.

Jon had a leaner build than Matt's other men, but the graceful strength and flexibility of an advanced yoga practitioner was obvious in his movements. It made him more than equal to the K&A standard of panty-dropping good looks and virility. Particularly with his dark blue eyes and fall of dark hair, and a voice that sounded like a late-night DJ, caressing Ros's ears even across the pool.

"It's tedious, how handsome they all are," Cass, on her left, spoke with a quirk of her full lips.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Ros said.

Jon caressed Rachel's lower back, and said something in her ear before flicking Dana's shoulder playfully and heading toward the table where the drink coolers were.

"That's what makes it so not-tedious," Vera observed. She sat on the pool edge several feet away, her feet trailing in the water, her arms braced behind her. "Every one of them is over the moon devoted to his wife. Or, in Max's case or yours," she sent Ros a teasing look, "the woman who is their wife in every way that matters."

"Mistress fits better." Ros meant it as a retort, but on reflection, she thought she was right. Max had taken a seat on the edge of Janet's lounge, and they were adjusting so he could straddle it behind her, letting her lean back against him. When she plucked at his shirt, his lips curved and he shrugged out of it, dropping it over an adjacent chair. Satisfied, she laid back against him, her hand resting high on his thigh.

Not a bad idea. Ros looked toward Lawrence. He'd greeted Jon at the drinks and was moving back her way. Dana had joined Peter in the pool while Rachel was talking to Athena. Probably giving her the high-level details of what had caused the delay with her patient.

Since Lawrence's path was taking him toward Athena and Rachel, Rachel shifted her glance to him. But the anticipated polite nod or introduction Ros expected to happen didn't.

Lawrence froze in place. At the same moment, Rachel's gaze stilled upon him, a puzzled look crossing her face, her brow creasing.

Lawrence's expression had transformed from casual interest to something Ros couldn't define, but she was already getting to her feet, breaking off her casual conversation with the other women mid-sentence.

Lawrence remained stock still, as if the world had suddenly

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disappeared for him and he had no idea where to place his feet to find solid ground. While curiosity alone would have propelled Ros around the pool to find out what about Rachel had caused the reaction, the Mistress in her said he needed someone at his back.

Or—no matter how Lawrence might object to the idea—standing in between him and what had so visibly rattled him about Jon's wife.



It had been over a decade. And yet the moment she turned her head away from Athena, with that smile, her golden hair framing her slightly rounded face, Lawrence had recognized her.

She looked different, though, in really good ways.

Somehow, he figured out how to make his feet move in her direction, a couple hesitant strides. When he drew closer, he could see the lines that tragedy and heartbreak had wrought. However, the sadness he remembered so vividly, born of the disappointment and helpless pain, were no longer there. He'd never heard her laugh in the way she had a moment before, from whatever Athena had said to her. Her laughter no longer sounded as if the weight of the world was sitting on it.

Her blue eyes could still strike a kid dead center, make him want to do anything to get her to smile. At least the kind of kid he'd been.

During the time Lawrence had come to a halt, Jon had returned to her side. Now the observant male was aware not only of Lawrence's approach, but the odd intensity of it. Since Jon had no idea why Lawrence was staring at Rachel the way he was, he'd set aside the drinks he'd brought for him and Rachel. He had his hand on her, his body angled slightly between the two of them.

"Mrs. Madison?" Lawrence said. He had to be sure.

He hadn't given her the same punch of recognition, but he

could tell he was familiar to her. Lawrence managed a smile with a razor's edge that sliced at his heart.

"Imagine me fat. A few inches shorter. A never-ending supply of zombie T-shirts."

Her hand clapped to her mouth, even as her gaze brightened. "Deadhead. Or Lawrence, I'm sorry."

"No sorries to be said. Been a long time since I heard the nickname."

The last person to use it, the person who'd meant a lot to him, and probably everything to her, was gone.

"Oh, well..." She sent Jon a reassuring look and stepped forward, arms extended in the usual Southern hug greeting for an old acquaintance.

Yeah, it should be that simple, right? Lawrence managed it, but when he put his arms around her, he knew he'd made a mistake. Why hadn't he kept his distance until he could adjust to her being here? Get his emotions under control?

The fragrant scent of her hair flooded him with memories, and his arms were holding her way too tight.

When he'd heard of Kyle's death, his teammates had understood, helped him deal. But it wasn't the same as grieving with someone who'd known Kyle. That unlocked something in him that had never had the chance to be expressed.

Kyle's posters in his room, the two of them hanging out together, playing video games. Dirt biking in the woods, sitting by the creek, looking at a skin mag he'd filched from his Dad's stash. Kyle's laughter, the last words they'd exchanged...

Fuck, fuck. Suddenly he was a fat, pimply teenager, and he honestly couldn't let her go.

Rachel's arms tightened around him, holding him so close, the way she would have then, when he was just a kid. Her hands moved up to cup his skull, and she murmured soothingly to him, though he heard the broken quality in her own voice. Strong and solid as she felt, this had taken her by surprise as well. He needed to pull his shit together.

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He hated to admit it, but he needed...and fuck, there it was. Rosalinda's hand on his back, beneath Rachel's, her scent close. His Mistress was here, steadying him.

Apparently, she and Jon had already decided on a nonverbal course of action, because they eased him and Rachel toward a pair of chairs in the corner of the pool house. Athena had discreetly withdrawn. The chairs were situated between a set of potted palms, which established a buffer between them and the fascinated curiosity of others.

But if there was anything the TRA and the K&A people understood, both as decent human beings and Doms and subs, it was when the illusion of privacy was needed. Yet Lawrence was only vaguely aware of conversations resuming, the focus returning to the setting up of the volleyball net. Right now, he could have been shot close range without ever seeing it coming.

Good thing his Mistress was watching his back, and the pool house was full of his brothers. He depended on that, giving this his full focus.

"What's going on, Lawrence?" Rosalinda asked, her hand resting on his shoulder.

"This..." He had to clear his throat. "My friend Kyle... This is his mother, Rachel Madison."

"Rachel Forte now," Rachel said. She briefly extended her hand to Rosalinda in greeting, but her gaze stayed on Lawrence, too. She managed a smile, reached out and cupped his face, caressing it. "I can't believe it. How you've changed, and yet...I look at your eyes, and you're the same."

"You're not." He looked at her, really looked at her. "You look happy. You were already pretty, but you're beautiful now. Glowing."

He looked at Jon, who was studying him with an unreadable look. "It's good to see. Thank you. She deserves that. She always did."

Jon's expression relaxed, and he shook Lawrence's extended hand. After another intent look at Rachel, where they did that

communication thing that close couples did, Jon spoke to Rosalinda. "How about we back off to those chairs there," he gestured. "Get to know one another while they catch up?"

Jon and Rosalinda already knew one another. Lawrence knew Jon meant "let's get on the same page" on this new variable, bring one another into the loop so they could support their significant others the way they might need.

Doms.

But he couldn't say he wasn't glad for it. Rosalinda had her gaze on Lawrence, and he gave her what he hoped was a reassuring look. He could handle this. He wouldn't mind her staying nearby, but he wasn't going to admit that. Thankfully Jon had taken care of it, but no surprise, his Mistress reinforced it.

"I'll be close," she said. "If you need anything."

As they watched Jon and Rosalinda retreat, Lawrence heard Jon politely asking Ros if he could bring her anything.

"Oh, crap. Sorry. Just a minute."

Lawrence sent Rachel a quick apologetic look and rose. He retrieved the water bottle he'd left on the side table when he'd recognized Rachel. He brought it to Rosalinda, nodding his thanks to Jon. When she closed her fingers over the bottle, caressing his, Lawrence remembered the desire to feel that touch, and was glad for it now. His Mistress stroked his wrist.

"Thank you, Lawrence." Another unspoken message of support and presence. Strength.

It was something he'd never expected from a woman. He was the one who gave *her* strength and support. But Rosalinda had taught him he could expect the same from a woman who truly loved him.

When he returned to sit by Rachel, Jon's wife smiled at Lawrence and echoed his thoughts. "Even when we watch over them, they never stop watching over us, do they?"

"Yeah." Their knees were already close, but he leaned forward, and she did the same, both of them chuckling a little, painful sounds.

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"It feels like he's even closer, if we draw together," she said. "Doesn't it?"

"It does. Do you mind?" He nodded to her hand, wanting to grip it, hold that connection. "Or I guess I should ask, would he mind..." He dipped his head toward Jon.

"No. He understands." Rachel gripped Lawrence's hand, then looked down at it. "Curious how things come back. I remember when you fell and scraped your hand on the driveway, that time you and Kyle were playing basketball."

"I remember." He'd had some pretty embarrassing fantasies with her head dipped over his hand while she checked out the injury, cleaned the cut. He'd been able to smell her hair, think way too much about the soft firmness of her touch. Simple adolescent fantasies.

They talked for a few minutes about those early memories, him and Kyle doing stupid shit and how it had made her laugh. Then he remembered other things.

How that constant expression of sadness would disappear when Kyle looked her way. She'd brighten for him. Yet as he got older, Kyle had adopted his father's attitude of contempt and dismissiveness toward her. It was what had goaded Lawrence to say what he had to Kyle, soon after graduation.

"Ever notice how your dad never says anything about your mom? It's always about him, you and him. Your dad's kind of an asshole. And if you don't wake up and see that, you're likely to become the same kind of asshole."

Next time they'd crossed paths, Kyle had told Lawrence that being in the military, even the short time he had at that point, had made him realize some stuff about himself. He'd finally gotten enough space from his dad to wake up and see what was going on.

"She's always been there for me, Lawrence. You're right. First leave I get, I'm going to tell her, and spend time with her. Change all that. And if Dad says one mean word to her, I'm going to tear him a new one. But I'm also going to tell her she needs to stand up to him, tell him to fuck off. She

just needs someone in her corner. She's strong enough to do it. I just don't think she ever had someone in her corner, not solid."

"Listen...I may be talking out of turn, Mrs. Mad...Mrs. Forte."

"Rachel," she said quietly. "You can call me Rachel."

He sent her a half smile. "Yeah. Crazy, but it feels like I'm still a kid around you."

As he told her what Kyle had said to him, her eyes glistened and she swallowed a couple times. Hell, he didn't want to make her cry, but he wanted her to know.

"He didn't need to worry so much," she said.

"He told me it really clicked when he read an email from his dad and one from you, sent on the same date. It was after you and his dad had separated, but you were still in touch with each other. His dad said something about you whining about not feeling good, but 'you know how your mother milks things.'" Lawrence paused as she flinched.

"Sorry. I shouldn't—"

"Yes. You should. Please tell me the rest. It's the past, and I've made my peace with it." Her shoulders squared, her back straightening as her gaze slid to Jon, returned to Lawrence. "It led me to where I was meant to be."

Lawrence continued reluctantly. Though his gut told him she needed to hear it, he had no desire to cause her pain. "Your email was full of nothing but good things, interest in what was happening about Kyle. You mentioned his dad had had the flu, but was doing well, so he didn't have to worry... Kyle realized then all the times your dad would lie about you, to make himself look better, keep Kyle on his side. Like being his parent was some kind of sick competition."

Whereas Rachel's focus had been, not on defending herself, but on being a caregiver, their wife and mother, trying to keep them from worrying about her while taking care of everything. Including taking the brunt of her husband's cruelty and masking it from Kyle's eyes.

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“Kyle said you should have put a foot up both their asses,” Lawrence added wryly, glad to see her faint smile in return.

But she wasn't an ass kicker. Kyle's father had construed her gentle, loving nature as weakness. When her husband or son told her she was falling short, she worked even harder to care for them.

Lawrence had been the enabler of an alcoholic for years. Maybe he'd understood Rachel because of it, that desire to love someone in all the soft ways, thinking they'd eventually get a clue and rise to the occasion of loving their enabler back. It didn't work that way. Rosalinda had taught him that. Helped him understand loving someone was about being tough on them in the right way. *Demanding* respect and care. Something pretty hard for a sub personality.

He might never have seen that connection between him and Rachel. Which made him all the gladder to see the strength in Rachel. It told Lawrence she'd found that kind of love with Jon. He'd bet good money the man behind him, watching her so closely, would never tolerate her expecting less for herself.

Same as Rosalinda expected of him.

“I know he didn't get to tell you all that. So when the guys in his unit told me his last words, and that they'd get that message to you, I was glad you'd at least have that.”

Her gaze came up, confused. “Last words?” she asked tentatively.

Oh, shit.

The shock of it hit him, followed by a surge of *WTF*. How could they not have...hell, how could *he* not have followed up, made sure? But he had been head-deep in being a team guy, and hadn't spared a thought for it.

“When I divorced,” Rachel said slowly, watching his face, “Cole made himself the primary contact. They may not have known how to find me. Or...they told Cole. Cole called and told me when they...notified him of Kyle's death.”

His unit wouldn't have fallen down on the job. Lawrence

knew that in his bones, because he knew some of those guys. Knew the reputation of their commanding officer. They'd told her husband, and he'd assured them he'd pass on the message. The dickhead had probably said something smooth like, "it'll be better coming from me."

The motherfucking bastard asshole. He deserved to be kneecapped. Actually, Lawrence was feeling like he deserved to be pummeled himself.

She knew her ex. He saw her reach the same conclusion he had, and it set off ripples uncovering the deep anguish and layers of disappointment he remembered too well.

Fuck, he was an idiot. Seeing her had unsteadied him, made him run off at the mouth. Just like the dumb kid he'd been.

Before he could say a word, though, she gripped his hands anew, leaning in with her eyes intent and brilliant, making him push away what was happening in his head and focus on her. She started to speak, then looked away, past his shoulder. She took a couple steadying breaths. Long, deep. He watched her shoulders ease down, the anguish dying away. She nodded, then her gaze shifted back to Lawrence.

"Please tell me."

Glancing over his shoulder, Lawrence saw Jon leaning forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, his full attention on his wife. She'd drawn strength from him, found her center.

Cole Madison no longer had the power to beat her down. She'd defeated the bastard on her own terms.

This was still so not the place to do this, but he wasn't going to deny her. Lawrence took his own steadying breath.

"You get busy, when you're overseas," he said. "You sometimes don't feel like you can really get into stuff, and he wasn't much of a writer."

"No, he wasn't." She offered a tight smile. "His father always pushed the active, physical side of things."

"Yeah." Lawrence wet his lips. "You know, we should get

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together for lunch or something, have a full talk about him. This probably isn't..."

"Everyone here is someone who cares about us," Rachel said, her gaze unwavering. "I think it's okay to say what's in our hearts, don't you? Is it something that bad?"

"No. God, no." Fuck it. Lawrence let it spill out of him, out of his heart. "Kyle had gotten lost, but he found his way back to you, Mrs. Madison. When he was shot...it was the top thing on his mind. His last words were, 'Tell my mom I really, really love her. And I'm so sorry.'"

It was in that moment Lawrence realized just how much Rachel had actually changed. The sad woman he'd known would have received that message with a tentative gratitude, as if she couldn't believe it was true.

Instead, she looked as if he'd confirmed a love already fully blooming inside her soul. Her smile was radiant, even as her eyes filled with tears that spilled out over her cheeks like soft diamonds. When she spoke, the strength in her voice reminded him how she'd held *him* when they embraced.

"There was a time I wouldn't have known it, would have doubted it." She was gripping his hand with both of hers now, giving them both strength. "But I now know that love isn't in words. Sometimes it isn't even in action, because you said it very aptly. We can get lost. The love is still there, though. Just weighed down under so much. But his spirit has touched me in so many ways since then, Lawrence. Taken that weight away."

She sighed. "I didn't recognize those moments for a while, but then one day I did. It was when I celebrated his birthday the way I always do." Her gaze slid past his shoulder, to her husband, then came back. "I felt his presence, and I knew there was nothing left to block the love that had always, *always* been there connecting us. Death doesn't stop it, so why would anything else? Right?"

"Yeah." He'd lost people down range, and the sharp pain of it sometimes made him doubt, but he believed it when she said it.

“I loved you, you know,” he said. “I don’t mean...I mean, yeah, as a kid, I had a crush on you. But I loved who you were to him. I’m glad you’ve found someone who sees how incredible you are.”

Rachel’s blue eyes glinted as she glanced toward Rosalinda. “Same to you. A formidable Mistress, no less.”

The back of his neck warmed, and she chuckled. “Almost everyone here today is part of that world, so it makes the connections pretty obvious, even if I didn’t already know that about Ros and her ladies. I like knowing someone is taking very good care of you.”

“She is. I’m trying to take very good care of her, too.”

“I’ve no doubt. I remember you always helped me put away lunch things, and said something nice to me, each time you visited. Even if you immediately charged out of the house afterward, the two of you like a herd of buffalo, bouncing the screen door against the siding.”

Her blue eyes twinkled again. “I’d have that part of those days back in a heartbeat, even though there are things about my life now I’m not willing to give up. Not ever again.”

“Good. Yeah, me too.” He thought of the road he’d made, from Valentina’s needy dependency and drinking, to Rosalinda, who needed him, but in a way that was healthy, making for a damn near unbreakable relationship.

They wouldn’t let it be broken.

“I need to let you join the party,” he said. “Athena saved you two some good eats.”

“And I see a pool volleyball game is in the works.” She smiled and rose, wiping her eyes. Jon rejoined them, handing her a napkin and touching her face, with a questioning look in his own.

“I’m good, Master,” she said, no self-consciousness to it. “Lawrence just told me some wonderful things about Kyle. I’d like to invite him and Ros to dinner one night, talk some more, get reacquainted.”

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“Ros and I were just discussing the same,” Jon said.

The love in Rachel’s face made it glow as she dimpled at her husband’s intuition. Rosalinda put an easy hand on Lawrence’s back, stroked. “I think that would be good,” she said.

Rachel shot Jon a mischievous look. “Maybe you could show Ros all the terrifying things in your workshop, if our walk down memory lane gets too tedious.”

“I can’t imagine that,” Jon said, though he nodded to Rosalinda. “But we’ll definitely include a workshop tour. Some of the things I’m working on have intriguing possibilities for your own uses.”

“It’s a date,” Rosalinda said. They exchanged a purely Dom-to-Dom smile that told Lawrence what kind of things might be in that workshop.

“I think I need to be worried,” he observed.

Jon flashed a grin and slipped Rachel’s hand in the crook of his arm. “Let’s eat,” he told her. “Then we can get changed for swimming.”

As they headed toward Athena, already putting out a couple plates for them at the wet bar, Rosalinda gave Lawrence an assessing look.

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

The emotions in her gaze, the way her hands were closed over his arm, told him his Mistress understood where his heart was on all of it. He might need the comfort of her arms and listening ear when they were together later tonight in her bed—much as he suspected Rachel would, after that revelation of just how much of an asshole her asshole ex really was—but right now he wanted to restore them to the lighter mood of the party.

“When she got all teary,” he admitted, “I figured Jon and the rest of Matt’s guys would pile on me and kick my ass.”

“They’re good about evaluating what’s happening before they decide on a course of action,” Rosalinda said. “Women cry happy tears, too. Those looked happy to me.”

"When a woman is crying, my first reaction is to look for who I need to kill," Lawrence said. "My second is to find out if it's my own ass that needs kicking. Then I think it through a little bit and decide on a different course."

"And that's what separates you from the cavemen." Ros gave him a knowing look. "She meant something to you."

When he tried to shrug it off, she smiled at his discomfited reaction. "Your ears are turning red."

"I had a few serious teenage MILF fantasies about her," he allowed, with a scrap of dignity. "Can't lie about that. But...it made me pay more attention to her, too, and realize what a good, caring person she was. Earth mother all the way. Seeing her here, as a sub...it freaks out the kid I was, but who I am now..." His brow creased. "I guess I painted subs with the same brush, but I don't see myself as the kind of submissive she is. Though we have some things in common I didn't expect."

"You're not the same. No more than Jon is the same kind of Dominant as I am. It's why generalizing about people is rarely a good thing. It puts things where you can't see who people are individually, what their needs are, what they're saying."

Rosalinda pursed her distracting lips. "I've had a lot of very enjoyable sessions with subs. Not a one of them like the other, needing exactly the same thing. Even if it looks like it. Two subs may want to kneel at my feet, but it can be for very different reasons, and the reaction it sparks inside them results in unique needs."

He was always grateful she never went into great detail about those past sessions, though he knew how experienced a Mistress she was, and how much she loved that world.

His gaze slid around the pool area. Their world. He was glad to be sharing it with her now, and being the only submissive she wanted.

What Marcie had said about marriage came back to him, making his stomach flop. The end result itself didn't make him nervous, because he had no doubt he wanted to be bound to her

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forever, legally or otherwise. But he'd have to give some thought to how to let her know that. She wasn't the type to appreciate a guy doing the grand proposal thing. She'd prefer...

The fill-in to that statement was so clear, he almost laughed out loud. "Mistress."

"Yes?" She glanced at him and he turned to face her, hold both her hands.

"If and whenever you decide it's something you want from me, I want you to know it's what I want, too."

"What's that?" She lifted a brow.

He held her gaze. "I want to marry you. I want to be yours in every way."

Her gaze flickered. If she had a *WTF* moment, she covered it well. Evaluated and rebounded, calling him on any bullshit to it. "And you want to know I'm yours, I expect."

He smiled, and let her see the challenge in it. "I already know that. Don't need a ring or piece of paper for it."

"Oh really?" Her brow arched further, her jeweled eyes getting that Mistress's glint. "How did you come by that information?"

"Because you tell me every day, in a hundred different ways. Same way I hope I tell you I'm yours."

Her sultry mouth eased its set, and she slid her hand up to his nape. She brought her lips close, but stopped a hair's breadth from his as she spoke.

"You feel my grip on your neck?"

"I do."

"What just happened?"

"You tightened it, to tell me not to take that kiss. That it's yours to give when you're ready."

"And yet you'll tempt me to give it to you, with that look in your eyes, your closeness, your touch. With all the things you give me a hundred percent."

Her eyes had locked with his, everything else gone away. "That's what you just did," she noted. "Isn't it?"

“Not that consciously, but I guess so.” He smiled, his heart full of her. He lifted a hand, brushed her hair from her cheek, let his thumb trace her delicate jaw. “I love you.”

Her lips curved in return, and she closed the distance, brushing her mouth over his, pressing her body full against him in that bikini. It was an effort not to put his hands on her luscious backside, haul her even tighter against him, but his Mistress rewarded self-restraint. She also liked to tease. His body was hard and aching when she stepped back, stared into his eyes.

“Get in the pool,” she said. “I want to see you wet.”



Abby stood in a rotunda of Athena’s extensive gardens, a rotunda which had at its center a three-foot-tall sculpture of the goddess Athena. She had her shield and spear, a lion at her hip. Her owl rested on her wrist, wings spread. The statue was mounted on a platform, water glossing the disc and falling into a fountain pool below. The plaque in front of the statue was a love note from Athena’s late husband:

For my Athena, who brought the strength and wisdom of a goddess to my life. Thank you for giving a mortal man your heart. Love you forever.
Roy

She saw movement in the corner of her eye, a shadow, and forced herself not to jump at it. It was starting to get close to dusk. She should have left mid-afternoon, but everyone was having a good time, including her. She liked being part of it.

When sitting by the campfire, no one left it to venture into the forest alone, after all.

Music filtered to her from the pool house. After a vigorous volleyball game, Rachel and Dana were talking about showing everyone some line dancing. Then Marcie and Ben would teach them some Latin dances that required a partner. She should go back, grab Cyn or Skye as her partner, because she’d like to learn.

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“Hey. You okay?”

She stiffened. “Yes. Just wanted to check out some things in the garden.” She’d needed a few minutes of space. “I’ll be back to the group shortly.”

She could be more insistent, but the problem was, when he came to stand next to her, that thing happened that she’d noticed before. He projected a calm which surrounded her, sank into her bones, like warmth from that imagined fire. He smelled like grill smoke, pool chlorine. And himself, a scent unique to him and appealing to her senses.

He gazed at the statue with her. “What kind of underwear do you think she has on under that toga?”

A laugh sputtered from her, unexpected. “I hadn’t given it any thought.”

He eyed the statue critically. “A push up bra, for sure.”

“If you’re a goddess, would you really need one?”

“Good point. And she has plenty of bigger stuff to worry about, running the world and all that.”

“You don’t think she has days she decides to let the world worry about itself?”

“Nope. Not in a goddess’s nature. Not that kind, at least.”

He’d shifted so he was just behind her right shoulder. If she eased back even an inch, her shoulder blade would brush his chest. “Do you do that unconsciously, because of your height?” she asked. “Not standing in front of someone?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty much always back row at parades and movie theaters. Which is fine. That’s where you can make out with your date without getting stared at. Squeeze her ass without disrespecting her in front of other people.”

“Another good point.”

She wandered away from the statue, sticking to the lighted path. Neil ambled along beside her, hands in his back jeans pockets, gaze wandering over the garden, over her, up to the emerging stars, back to her.

She came to a stop, turned to face him. “You know we

wouldn't work. Unless you're just looking for a pleasurable fuck. I might consider that. On my own time and terms."

His gray eyes darkened, jaw tightening. "Think that's what I'm after?"

"It doesn't matter what you're after. It's the only thing on the table, and the meal will be at my invitation. It's not a done deal, just because I'm considering it."

His expression slid to neutral, but there was something behind his gaze that required effort to hold her ground.

"And why don't we work?" he asked evenly.

"You know why. I'm a Mistress. A sexual Dominant. And you are not a sub. That isn't always a deal breaker, if you're adventurous and have enough of a service side, and I expect you do. But the problem is you have a lot of Dom to you, too, even if you've never explored it. Enough you wouldn't be able to help yourself. You'd chafe at not having the upper hand."

She had an out there. Could offer to help him explore it, find someone else more to his tastes. She could think of a dozen submissive women at the club who'd love to hook up with him. Who'd jump at an ongoing relationship with him.

She found the idea unappealing. She told herself it was because she didn't want to be anyone's mentor. Any other reason for her reaction was irrelevant.

"Do you know what any of that means?" She couldn't betray Lawrence's privacy if he hadn't revealed his submissive nature to his friends, but when Neil's expression didn't flicker, she had a feeling he knew far more about all of it than likely even Lawrence had guessed.

And it called to something in her. She'd taken a step closer without realizing it. She'd say she was standing in the shadow of that tall body, except there were no shadows there.

Hell, if she *was* a sub, a safe word with him would be easy, wouldn't it? *Sunlight*.

He gazed down at her. "Maybe we should try it out. Your way,

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then my way, and see how it works itself out. No harm, no foul if it doesn't."

"What's your way?"

"Have to show you that." His eyes crinkled. "On *my* own time and terms."

She chuckled. "In your dreams, sailor."

By teasing her, he put her on firmer ground. She reminded herself this wasn't going farther than this conversation, so she was willing to play a little. No different from banter she'd had with other Doms. Plus it distracted her from the sun going down.

Then he turned the tide on her again, asking a question that said he saw too much.

"How're your dreams, Abby? Are they lonely? Happy? Sad?"

"Don't do that." She took a full step back. "I didn't invite you in that deep."

"And I need an invitation," he said, repeating her words.

"Yes." She drew herself up. "You sure as hell do."

He nodded. "Okay. I want to kiss you."

She blinked. "Why?"

A light smile touched his lips. "Because I'm not dead. But more than that, your mouth fascinates me. It telegraphs everything, all your emotions, while offering a ton of mystery. It's also showing you're tense right now, a tension I'd like to help take away."

Though he didn't move, his words brought him even closer. "And then there's the most important thing. I just love your fucking mouth. I've dreamed of it. Am I in your dreams at all, Abby?"

She stared at his chest, refusing to look up. She was a good Domme. She kept total control in a session environment, with well-defined parameters. Even outside them, she usually held the reins pretty firmly. She'd been off lately, and it was showing. She wasn't the kind of Domme that Ros was, fueled by that total control of every conversation or encounter. Abby could let it

flow like water. But this was a current, pulling her in deeper, stronger than she could swim against.

She stepped back. A bigger step this time. “Not now,” she said. She pulled a page from Ros’s book, because she couldn’t find her own at the moment. “When I say. Not before.”

He considered that. Held out a hand. “How about walking with me then, check out more of the gardens? Can you do that?”

His gray eyes touched hers. They didn’t draw her back to him, but the lock between them kept her from wanting to escape. She didn’t lift her hand toward his, but her gaze went to his offered one, stayed. As the moment drew out, he was the one who made the decision. He reached out further to close his fingers around hers at her side. Then he drew her arm forward so their hands were linked in the open space between the two of them. He waited another moment, made sure she wasn’t going to object, then nodded.

“Let’s just walk a bit.”



Enjoying the view of Lawrence, shirtless and muscles glistening with water, made Ros really wish she could be in the pool. However, watching him play pool games with the other equally attractive men and women was a good consolation prize. Dana hadn’t been exaggerating her “Marco” skills. She captured Max within seconds. When the volleyball game got started, even Cyn was willing to prudently withdraw with the other women to reap the benefit of letting the men unleash their rougher competitive side. It meant lots more muscles flexing, powerful bodies lunging and powering the ball back and forth over the net.

Matt was an unexpectedly good volleyball player and could spike the ball hard enough to send it to the bottom of the pool. Watching him and Lucas go up against each other on opposite sides of the net several times brought to mind the earlier college

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shower fantasy. She wasn't the only one. The smirks Cass and Vera sent her way confirmed it.

While that mix of play and battle men so often displayed when it came to sports was a nice distraction, Ros wasn't so immersed that she overlooked Abby's absence, as well as Neil's. Vera, Cyn and Skye did as well, acknowledging it with that exchange of looks that contained a lot of speculation.

She hoped whatever happened, her friend wasn't shutting herself down to the possibilities the intriguing SEAL presented.

When the game was finished, more cocktails were made and dispersed, most the party goes relaxing into general socializing, in the pool and alongside it. There'd be dancing later, plus a movie offering in Athena's home theater.

It had been a day of good company, good food and engaging play. As the sun drew toward dusk, Ros noted a gradual drift away from group socializing toward the more one-on-one kind. Lured by it, after finishing her drink and a conversation with Cyn and Savannah, Ros left her lounge chair and sat on the pool edge, dangling her legs in.

Not surprisingly, Lawrence met her there, coming to her with the help of a few easy strokes, a tempting display of rippling back and shoulder muscles.

As he moved between her adjusted knees, she rested her palm on his shoulder, caressing the damp hair at his nape.

"I have a wish," he said, curling his hand around her calf. He bent and kissed her knee. With a measured glance up at her, gauging her reaction and the unspoken invitation to continue, he dropped a kiss higher on her thigh. This one was more to the inside, sending tingles shooting upward and through her core. "But it'll have to happen another day," he continued. "When there's no danger to you in the pool."

"Tell me your wish now, though," she said.

"I want to hold you in the water, your arms and legs wrapped around me. The two of us aware of nothing else." He smiled. "Like a pair of teenagers."

“I can manage the legs from right here.” She shifted her foot to caress his abdomen, tease at the waistband of his swim shorts.

Dale and Athena were nested together in a wide lounge chair, Athena reclined against his sprawled body, between his legs. When Dale had donned swim shorts, Ros had been surprised, since Dale rarely wore clothing that revealed his amputation. The fact he did, and even removed his prosthesis so he could join in on the volleyball game, said he was comfortable with the current gathering. He’d also proven his balance was as good, perhaps even better at times, than his two-legged teammates. There was a reason the man worked out like he was still a SEAL.

He hadn’t put the prosthesis back on once he was out of the water. Athena lay on her side against the inside of his thigh, his intact leg bent over her folded knees. His hands had started to wander in a way that had Athena’s focus on anything else hazy, her attention on her Master.

So it was no surprise that now, as Ros’s toes played along Lawrence’s navel, Dale brought Athena to her feet with easy strength, supporting her waist as he propped himself on his one crutch. His wife caught everyone’s attention with a cleared throat. When she spoke, her voice had a huskiness to it. Dale’s fingers on her hip were firm and steady.

“Please feel free to seek out whatever corner of our home you might need for...a nap. We have plenty of bedrooms.” Her gaze twinkled. “For those who prefer a more communal area, like the pool, you’re welcome to it.”

After that congenial announcement, Dale and Athena disappeared within a few moments. Ros observed Matt and Savannah, Lucas and Cass, the more private players of the K&A team, following suit shortly thereafter. Janet and Max had to take their leave, but it was temporary. Janet was teaching a five o’clock dance class, but they’d be back for the movie and to stay the night, an invitation that had been offered to all of them.

So that left the pool area to those who didn’t require privacy. Who might even feed off the energy that came from knowing

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they were sharing the room with others while engaged in more blatant sexual activity.

Peter and Dana were drifting around the pool much as Lawrence had described wanting to do with Ros. Dana's arm was linked around her Dom's neck, his lips along her temple as he murmured to her. Ben and Marcie had taken over the corner by the steps, her straddling his lap as he pressed his mouth to her sternum. As Ros looked that way, Ben's glance shifted to hers. Held, even as he continued to stroke Marcie's back, her hips. Ros picked up on the meaning, and nodded in return. She'd handle it.

It was one of the many things she liked about this world. The subtle ways Dominants who understood one another could communicate their preferences, without disrupting the energy flow.

She drew Lawrence's gaze to her. "From here forward, eyes only on me, unless I order otherwise. You'll be able to hear what's going on, but not see it. Only me."

"Only way I'd want it, Mistress." He proved his understanding by gripping her wrist, kissing the tender inside of her forearm. "I won't intrude on their privacy."

Ben had eased down the straps of Marcie's swimsuit top, a flirty blue dress thing that fluttered around her hips. It gave him the ability to take full command of her swelling breasts in both palms. As he bent his head to suckle, she tipped her head back, shuddering and letting out a little moan at the sensation.

Peter was kissing Dana, cupping her short haired skull as she tightened her arms and legs around him, her hips moving as she rubbed herself against what Ros was sure was a growing erection. If not already at full mast.

Vera, Cyn and Skye were relaxed poolside, watching, but their female attention was obviously not a problem for the two Masters or their subs. Overall, it was a stimulating environment for those who had some mild exhibitionism tendencies. Low key.

Her sub didn't really have those tendencies, but he wasn't

opposed to it. He just had one focus when his Mistress was commanding him. Her.

She had no problem with that, either.

She rested on her elbows, spreading her knees wider. “Hold,” she murmured. Lawrence stayed where he was, his hands now on her knees, body square with her pulsing core. Though he complied with her command, the energy coming off his body and sparking in his green eyes gave her stomach a pleasant quake.

She slid her fingers into the bikini bottoms, slowly stroked herself as he watched, licked his lips. Sparks went to flame as she cupped her breast, toyed with the nipple. As Lawrence watched it shape into an eager point, she enjoyed goading his hunger. Her submissive was obedient, until the animal in him started getting growly. She liked pushing him to that. Feeling the pressure of self-restraint against her command.

“Lick my fingers, Lawrence. Through the fabric. Just my fingers.”

She kept them moving slow, and though he made no contact with her cunt, the heated moistness of his breath and tongue, caressing her fingers through the cloth, sent a jolt through her. Like a touch against a vibrator already held against quivering flesh. She let out an erratic breath. “Ask me for what you want.”

“I want my mouth on you. I want to tongue fuck you to climax.”

“Why?”

When he lifted his thick lashes to meet her gaze, his lips were flushed and full from the pressure he'd put upon her fingers with them. “Because giving you pleasure makes my dick hard. Makes me feel alive and right.”

She trailed her free set of fingers along his strong jaw. “How about fucking me? Is that something you want?”

“That’s a gift I want to earn, Mistress.”

She slid her fingers free of the bikini bottoms and fed the digits between his firm lips. As he sucked on them, he lifted his hand to grip her wrist. Practically, it was to hold her arm steady,

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but it also sent her that key message that he wasn't a docile pet. Not in the least. He liked to take control, but only when it was her will.

When she withdrew her fingers slowly, he released her, though with obvious lingering reluctance, emphasizing the thought. "Put your mouth between my legs. Bring me to climax." She glanced at the clock on the wall of the pool house, a whimsical thing where the arms were like golf clubs, the numbers centered inside the white pitted balls. Athena's husband had liked golf, she remembered.

"I'll give you three minutes," she told Lawrence. "If you can't do it, I do it myself and make you watch. You can clean me up with your mouth afterward."

"Failure's never an option, ma'am." With a sexy grin, he bent to his task.

He knew her body, and he was a determined man. He knew when achieving the goal wasn't about a show of force or impatience. As she adjusted her thighs out, he slid his hands beneath them, giving her that further tactile pleasure. He acted like he had all the time in the world, settling down to trace her labia with his tongue, teasing her with its lightness and pressure. As her hips began to move and her lids fell half closed at the searing delight of it, he changed it up, alternating in diabolical ways, swirling his tongue in an unexpected move over her clit, followed by a quick nip that rewarded him with a soft gasp, the lifting of her hips closer to his mouth as she wrapped her legs over his back.

Though she was tempted to lie all the way back, being on her elbows let her enjoy watching the others. Ben was bringing Marcie down on his cock. Though Ros couldn't see the joining point, it was obvious from the undulation of Marcie's upper body, the way her head tipped back, and Ben's grip on her hips. Ros had heard rumors about his size, and it seemed to be borne out by the way Marcie and he worked together, making the less-than-easy fit work.

Peter and Dana had chosen Ros's preference, though Peter was feeling quite forceful about it. Dana was laid out on the lip of the pool, her hips pulled to the edge as he worked his mouth deep between her spread legs. He'd ordered her to keep her hands in a knot above her as he pushed her legs out wide and worked her clit with a ruthless intent that tore cries from her parted lips. Her slim upper body undulated in an erotic dance anchored by his sure grip, the working of his mouth on her core. Several times he stopped to spank her cunt with a flat palm, making her rock and jerk, beg for mercy, before he put his mouth on her again.

It all drove Ros's own response, and she suspected Lawrence's, since he had to be hearing it, feeling that sensual energy. A glance toward Vera, Cyn and Skye showed them in the mesmerized state of engaged Mistresses, drinks forgotten at their side. Afterward, she expected they might excuse themselves to find a private spot to enjoy a release. Or Cyn might end up doing it right here.

"Oh..." Lawrence had pushed his tongue against the fabric hard enough to break the one-syllable response from her lips.

"Underneath," she managed.

He hooked the crotch of her swimsuit, pushed it aside. Her moan dug from deep inside as his mouth fully closed over her clit and labia, his tongue working inside her, that thrust, retreat and swirl, coming up to play along the clit, and then plunging deep inside again. She cupped his head, held it tight between her legs, demanding he work harder, faster.

The clock showed thirty seconds to go. She could hold out, punish him by making him watch her give herself the release. It would be a pleasure to deny him, only to reward him again later, but fuck, it felt so very good...

She'd be merciful today.

She was generous that way.

The tide of her release pushed deliberations away, her hips bucking up against his clever mouth. His arms went fully around

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her thighs, holding her, her alpha. It allowed him not only to give her the full measure of satisfaction, but the increased stimulation took her beyond self-consciousness to full-throated cries like Dana's.

Somewhere in the background, someone else was climaxing. Perhaps Marcie or Dana. But it was all background, everything the insistent touch of Lawrence's mouth, the demanding grip of his hands.

And when she was at last done, her tug on his hair telling him to ease up, he began to clean her with tender, caressing licks. The suppressed urgency in the movement of his tongue told her how aroused he was, even as he was caring for her.

It never failed to spike a new surge of desire inside her, something far beyond the physical. He was hers. This wonderful, beautiful, complicated man belonged to her.

"Damn, I need one of those," she heard Cyn say to Vera. "Like a purse. Just bring it to every event, equipped with everything you need to get off, whenever, however."

Ros felt a weak ripple of humor, then her awareness of her ladies was gone again as Lawrence adjusted to slide his arms under her elbows, her waist. He scooped her off the concrete, his palms against her back, to hold her upright against him, his head against her breast, hands sweeping over her curved back and down to her hips, then back up again, fingertips tracing right below the tattoo.

She gripped his shoulders, dug in, and pressed a kiss to his hair, speaking into his ear. "I want to find one of those quiet places, Lawrence. I want you inside me. You know where we need to go?"

"Yes, ma'am." He eased his arms from around her slowly, but he was out of the pool fast. Fast as she'd imagine him responding to enemy fire. Then he reached down. She thought he was helping her up, and he was, but once he had her on her feet, he scooped her up and lifted her. A move so easy it took her breath

away, though being a hard-assed Domme, no one would ever get her to admit it.

Except maybe him. She'd tell him how much she enjoyed it, because what pleased her gave meaning to his whole world. He'd told her that, more than once.

He was already through one of the open sliding doors and headed away from the pool building. She was glad he knew Dale and Athena's house so well, because in a matter of seconds, he had stepped into the largest outbuilding. It was where the arcade and indoor recreational equipment were housed. He sat her on a pool table covered with a padded mat, bracing an arm at her side, his body in between her legs. A glance down told her he was more than ready to give her what she wanted. Fill her until it hurt, in the right ways.

"This okay, Mistress?"

"Maybe." She met the heat in his gaze. "Why here?"

"Next time I play pool here with the other guys, I want to remember you on this table."

"Might destroy your concentration."

He smiled at that, but she could see the urgency in him. He didn't want to talk anymore. She laid back on the mat, draping her arms decadently above her head. "So what's the hold up, sailor?"

He got rid of the shorts, her swimsuit bottoms, then gripped her thighs. She would have expected him to thrust into her like a battering ram, was prepared to allow him that freedom. His cock looked hard and thick, ready to do just that. But first he put his hand between her legs, stroked, making sure she was still wet.

Her sub, always watching out for her care. It twisted her heart, squeezed it, and she abandoned play. She gripped his forearm, brought it up so she could lick his fingers as he leaned over her, his body pressed against her inner thighs, his cock brushing her folds. "Now, Lawrence," she said. "Don't be gentle."

He shifted his hand to cup her jaw, rub a finger over her lips, then moved down to her shoulder and lower. As he molded his

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palm over the side of her breast, he caressed the silky fabric of the swimsuit top. He reached under her, released the fastener, got rid of it so they were both naked.

When he returned one hand to her waist, he used the other to guide himself to the mouth of her sex. Then he thrust inside her, with raw power and passion.

She let out a pleased grunt at the force of it, telling him he'd obeyed her just as she'd intended. She kept that going. "Let me feel how much you want my cunt," she said, staring at him. "I want to feel you deeper than any feeling in my whole life."

His gaze flared and his face got that warrior fierceness that impressed and terrified her at the same time. Terrified, because it had been honed by situations where he'd been a breath away from being taken from her, probably countless times before she'd even met him.

But that was in the past. He'd made it to her arms, and she was never letting him go. She surged up off the table, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, and he accommodated her, swinging her off the table and around to the wall, which allowed him to keep shoving into her, buttocks working under the wrap of her legs, until he turned his face to her, showed her the need in his eyes.

"Say it," she said. "Ask for what you want."

"Permission to come, ma'am," he managed in a hoarse growl.

"You have it."

A quick nod, but he had one more gift for her. "You're everything," he told her. "My Mistress."

He had his hand braced behind her, keeping her from the full bruising effect of the impact of his thrusts, but he released with the animal savagery she loved. His expression, fixed on her, showed her there was nothing else in this moment for him but her, and what she wanted from him. He'd think of that, even in that haze. Because he offered pure service to her, on every level.

Their heartbeats slowly returned to a less chaotic level, and he lifted her away from the wall. She wasn't sure there was a

good resting point except for the pool table, but he surprised her, carrying her with impressive steadiness as he shouldered through another doorway. It revealed a lovely little guestroom tucked at the back of the recreation building. The wide windows showed the gardens. Specifically a trimmed hedge outline of a rotunda with a fountain in the center. Just beyond it was an elegant gazebo, canopied by oaks dripping with Spanish moss.

There was a bathroom, and he snagged one of the bath towels between two of the fingers he had pressed high on her back. When he set her on her feet by the bed, he held her one armed and spread out the towel before easing her down upon it, the terry cloth a protective cover for the pretty embroidered quilt. It was also soft on the still somewhat tender skin between her shoulder blades.

“Very considerate,” she approved. “I see why Athena found you a good guest. Though I hope not for this specific reason.”

He sent her a half-smile. He started to turn away from her, and she realized he was going to get another towel, so he could lie beside her. Instead, she tightened her hand on his forearm, drawing his attention back to her. With the pressure of her fingers, she guided him down upon her, where she could cradle him between her thighs, have him rest his head on her breast, his arms coiled loosely around her.

“I’ll get too heavy.”

“I’ll tell you when you do. This is how I want you right now.”

The contented sigh, an acquiescence, melted him against her. She curled her arms around him, holding him to her as he stroked her sides, her hips. She thought of what she’d felt at the height of their coupling, and let it lead her. “Lawrence.”

“Hmm.” He’d found her fingers, linked with them.

“I want you to marry me.”

Whatever post-coital somnolence had gripped him disappeared. He propped himself up on an elbow to look down at her, the green eyes sharp.

He took a moment, gazing into her face, reading everything

she let him see there, and then his eyes filled with emotions that only galvanized what she felt.

“It’s be my honor, Mistress,” he said. “When?”

“When would you like?”

He smiled. “What are you doing tonight?”

She chuckled. “A little soon for me. I’m a prolonged engagement kind of person.” She pursed her lips. “How about next week? I think I can pencil it in.”

“Or...” He stroked a tendril of her hair back from her cheek. During their lovemaking, some of it had escaped from the clips she’d used to keep it off her neck. “How about we go to a place you love,” he said. “Somewhere that has meaning to you, at the time of year you like best, and get married there? Surrounded by the people who care about you. I want it to be special for you. For both of us.”

She eased him back so she could sit up. He adjusted the towel so they could sit on it, side by side, him turned, one knee bent, to face her. “You’ve been thinking about this,” she said.

“Yeah. I want it to be everything you’d like for it to be.”

“And for you?”

He gave her honesty, and her heart another twist. “I’d like my mother to be there. And my brother and sister.” He tilted his head. “What would you like?”

“Hmm. Do you want me to wear a white dress?” She liked testing him, sometimes for fun. Sometimes for deeper reasons.

“I want you to wear what you like. It won’t be white. It’ll be a bold color. Something that matches your eyes. You strike me as an evening wedding woman, so it’ll be slinky, showing off that beautiful body of yours. Tempting me to put my hands on every curve.” His gaze dropped. “And with your love of shoes, you’ll pick out a pair that makes the most of your gorgeous legs. All I’ll think about through the whole ceremony is them wrapped around me, the heels digging into my ass, driving me to give you everything you demand. Now and forever. Just like the vows say.”

Her hands were on his face, and she took his mouth as a

Mistress would. A full claiming, deep plundering, so that his hands gripped her hips and he growled into her mouth, an answer to the fierceness of her demand, telling her he was a match for it. The kiss went on long enough that, by the time it was done, he was lying upon her again, her legs wrapped over his hips again.

And since he was endowed with the blessings of a virile man in his prime, he was hard enough that she tightened her legs and brought him inside her again. Before they went any further, though, she made him draw his mouth back and stared up at him.

“I plan to demand something special from you in those wedding vows,” she said.

“Something along the lines of ‘I promise to serve and protect you with my heart, soul and body, all my life?’” His gaze burned down into hers.

“Oh Lawrence.” Emotions spilled from her. “I love you.”

“That’s the only vow I need from you, Mistress,” he told her. “The only thing I ask. Give me that gift forever.”



The End

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If you are a fan of Joey’s work, she has a whole library of free content “revisits” with her series characters. Just visit the Cantrips (Vignettes) page on her website, storywitch.com and download your choices. Under the More menu item, you can also find a handful of character interviews.

SIDE NOTE: Matt Kensington’s story, as well as those of his four-man executive team—Lucas, Peter, Jon and Ben—were told in each of the award-winning Knights of the Board Room series books. One of these stories also included Max and Janet’s story (*Willing Sacrifice*). It was the success of this series that launched the Mistresses of the Board Room spinoff.

While his book is a “non-series” title, Dale is obviously intimately connected to the Knights of the Board Room. His story can be read in *Unrestrained*.

You can find a full list of these books and links to them in the following pages.



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other book-reading friend. Or mention the books on social media, at a book club meeting or online forum, in an Amazon or GoodReads review, or wherever you feel comfortable. You, the pleased reader, are the best marketing strategy authors can have. If you do just one of those things to spread the word about her work, we will be very grateful!

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Here are some other places to find out more about Joey and her work!

- **Website:** storywitch.com
- **Facebook:** [JoeyWHillAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/JoeyWHillAuthor)
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joey W. Hill writes about vampires, mermaids, boardroom executives, cops, witches, angels, housemaids...pretty much wherever her inspiration takes her. She's penned over fifty acclaimed titles and six award-winning series, and been awarded the RT Book Reviews Career Achievement Award for Erotica. But she's especially proud and humbled to have the support and enthusiasm of a wonderful, widely diverse readership.

So why erotic romance? "Writing great erotic romance is all about exploring the true face of who we are – the best and worst - which typically comes out in the most vulnerable moments of sexual intimacy." She has earned a reputation for writing BDSM romance that not only wins her fans of that genre, but readers who would "never" read BDSM romance. She believes that's because strong, compelling characters are the most important part of her books.

"Whatever genre you're writing, if the characters are captivating and sympathetic, the readers are going to want to see what happens to them. That was the defining element of the romances I loved most and which shaped my own writing. Bringing characters together who have numerous emotional obstacles standing in their way, watching them reach a soul-deep understanding of one another through the expression of their darkest sexual needs, and then growing from that understanding into love - that's the kind of story I love to write."

ALSO BY JOEY W. HILL

Arcane Shot Series

Something About Witches

In the Company of Witches

The Problem With Witches (*A Knights of the Board Room Crossover*)

Daughters of Arianne Series

A Mermaid's Kiss

A Witch's Beauty

A Mermaid's Ransom

Knights of the Board Room Series

Board Resolution

Controlled Response

Honor Bound

Afterlife

Hostile Takeover

Willing Sacrifice

Soul Rest

Knight Nostalgia (*Anthology*)

Mistresses of the Board Room Series

At Her Command

Nature of Desire Series

Holding the Cards

Natural Law

Ice Queen

Mirror of My Soul

Mistress of Redemption

Rough Canvas
Branded Sanctuary
Divine Solace
Worth The Wait
Truly Helpless
In His Arms

Naughty Bits Series

Naughty Bits
Naughty Wishes

Vampire Queen Series

Vampire Queen's Servant
Mark of the Vampire Queen
Vampire's Claim
Beloved Vampire
Vampire Mistress (*VQS: Club Atlantis*)
Vampire Trinity (*VQS: Club Atlantis*)
Vampire Instinct
Bound by the Vampire Queen
Taken by a Vampire
The Scientific Method
Nightfall
Elusive Hero
Night's Templar
Vampire's Soul
Vampire's Embrace
Vampire Master (*VQS: Club Atlantis*)

Non-Series Titles

If Wishes Were Horses
Virtual Reality

Unrestrained

Medusa's Heart

Novellas

Chance of a Lifetime

Choice of Masters

Make Her Dreams Come True

Threads of Faith

Submissive Angel

Short

Snow Angel

