

CHAPTER 1



*K*atherine couldn't begin to count the number of ways in which her life had changed over the past few weeks. Sometimes it was hard to remember that it had been such a short time. Last month, she'd been a mostly happy girlfriend and submissive, finding fulfillment in those roles as she put together a life for herself. Her dominant boyfriend, Christopher, was also her boss, which, in retrospect, had turned out to be a terrible idea, but at the time it seemed perfect.

It had been a new thing, taking her fantasies of submission to real life with him, which meant she didn't entirely understand that she wasn't getting the best deal out of their relationship. She knew she had some reservations and that he pushed too hard to guide her toward the things he wanted, but then, she expected that from a dominant man. And if sometimes he punished her by giving her the cold shoulder and shutting her out until she caved to his demands, well, that was his right as the top in their relationship, wasn't it?

Right up until the moment when he broke off their relationship and shoved her out into the world on her own, she'd thought she was fairly happy with the situation. She'd blamed herself for dragging her feet and refusing to give in to Christopher, because wasn't

that what submissives were supposed to do? She'd thought that was how it was meant to be, and generally, she did give him what he wanted. The only thing she'd managed to put her foot down on was giving up her apartment to move in with him.

She loved Christopher, or she thought she did, but she also liked her space. She was proud of her small rental because it was the first place she'd ever been able to call her own, paid for with her own money and filled with her own things. Second-hand used things, to be sure, but still hers, and she loved them.

Shortly after the third time he'd pressed hard for her to move into his house, Christopher severed their relationship. There'd been no warning, at least not that she'd noticed. They'd been together a year and a few months, and she'd actually half-wondered if he wasn't planning on proposing to her when he told her that he was taking her out for a special dinner. He'd been acting so secretive and mysterious that she'd somehow built it up in her mind that he was going to ask her to marry him. She couldn't have been more wrong about his intentions.

Before their dinners had arrived, Christopher broke the news to her. He'd been kind and gentle about it, seeming almost regretful, but firm, that the relationship was over. Then he'd suggested that she take a vacation alone to sort out her head. The cruise he'd purchased for their one-year anniversary was already paid for, after all, so there was no reason to let it go to waste.

She was empty, confused and completely at a loss with what she was going to do with her life now that they were through. Even her job was compromised, since he was her boss, and she couldn't imagine continuing to work with him after all they'd shared. In a way, she blamed herself. She had a degree in Human Resources management; she should have known what a bad idea an office romance could be—especially one as deeply intense as theirs had been, but he'd been so charming in the beginning.

He'd known her for a submissive immediately, he'd told her, exactly the kind of woman he liked. He'd pursued her carefully

with small gifts and indulgences, but she could have done without those. What really pulled her in was that aura of dominance. He seemed to know exactly what she wanted, and he gave it to her. With the slightest glance, the softest touch, he made her want him. It hadn't been long before they began to date seriously, and then it was a short jump to the bedroom. He set her body aflame, made her feel things she'd never felt before, and within six months, he'd locked a bracelet on her ankle that stated clearly she was 'Owned'.

She'd loved that feeling of belonging to him. It became the focus of her life inch-by-inch, and by the time she realized what was happening, it was too late, and she was entirely snared in his web. Pleasing him was everything, and she was in too deep to notice that he cared very little about *her* wants and needs. The focus of their D/s relationship was very heavily slanted towards *his* desires alone, and when she occasionally did notice the disparity, she didn't mind, because it made her submission feel more real to her. He controlled everything in her life and she reveled in it, until she wouldn't give in on that one last thing—and then everything came crashing down.

So, for lack of a better idea, she'd taken the cruise, with no expectation of enjoying it at all. For the first day, she'd moped around looking miserable and trying not to cry every time she saw a happy couple strolling by. Then she'd decided to drown some of her sorrows in the fruity tropical drinks that were so plentiful onboard the ship. It wasn't the best idea—very obviously, a mistake—and yet that decision thrust her headfirst into the one thing she'd never expected to find during the trip—love.

His name was Jack. Jackson Emmanuel Drake, to be exact, and she still thought it sounded like a movie star's name, but that was fitting since he'd rescued her just like an action hero. He'd saved her, and not just emotionally, though he did that, too. Arriving just in the nick of time, he'd kept her from toppling over the rail of her suite's balcony. Probably, she'd have fallen backwards and landed on her ass, a little sore, but fine—but there was the very real chance

she'd have fallen the other way, vanished into the waves, and never been seen again. Luckily, they'd never know which way it would have gone, because he'd been there to grab her.

Unfortunately for her, Jack was a dominant man through-and-through, and she'd put herself in danger through a series of incredibly self-destructive choices. He was furious, and she was filled with guilt—how else could it end, but with him giving her the most thorough spanking of her life? That was probably when she'd started to fall in love with him. She'd never believed in love at first sight but maybe, for her, at least, love at first spank was possible.

As her feelings for the man grew, so did her awareness that something wasn't quite right with him. Oh, he was perfect for her in every way, but she'd begun to notice that there were some subjects he wouldn't discuss, and he had the oddest habit of disappearing, practically in front of her! She knew he was keeping some big secret; he was upfront about it and also firm about his decision to leave her in the dark. She was to learn very quickly that when Jack was set on something, he didn't budge, not an inch. She'd found that out the hard way when she tried to get him into bed.

He'd refused to sleep with her until she removed the anklet that made her Christopher's property, and she'd thought she could get around that with seduction. It had failed, spectacularly, and in a way that made her think twice about trying again. She had to admit it was worth the wait, when she *did* decide she was ready to remove the chain, but until it had come off, he'd stubbornly refrained from anything sexual. That didn't, however, save her ass from his hard hand when she acted up. For Jack, punishment and sex were two very different things—and that had been a new lesson for her as well. Things had been different with Christopher; he could always be guided towards sex.

They spent the rest of the cruise together, and long before the end of it, she knew she didn't want to let him go. It was only a vacation romance, and soon they'd have to go their separate ways, which upset her. She wasn't sure what would happen at that point,

but she knew she wouldn't be able to just walk away from him without falling apart all over again. There were also the mysterious secrets he was keeping from her and how those might affect things. She'd begun to come up with the weirdest explanations for the oddities she'd noticed.

When he'd finally confessed his secret—that he was a time traveler from the past—he'd done it in a way that left her completely convinced it was true. How else could he possibly have known about the unscheduled rainstorm? Or the fact that it would pull a swarm of monarch butterflies out of the migration path, only to deposit them in a secluded glade, just in time for them to arrive and witness the event? There was no other explanation that made sense—he could travel through time.

Finally, everything seemed to be going in the right direction. She no longer wore Christopher's chain, and Jack seemed well on the way to claiming her for himself. She now knew his secret, and it was a wonderful bit of magic that sparked her creative muses. She'd always hoped to find magic, real magic, in the world, and now she had. Best of all, Jack had no ties and seemed perfectly willing to follow her home, so the romance didn't have to end when the trip did.

The sudden arrival of Christopher on the ship threw everything into chaos. She began to suspect then that Christopher had dumped her on purpose. She wondered if it was a ploy to make her so desperate to please him that she'd finally give him everything he demanded. That had recently been confirmed by his own admission, and when she'd heard it, she'd begun to hate him. It was such a manipulative thing to do to someone who had trusted you with their submission; something Jack would never do.

She was glad now, for his shock when he found her completely happy and unwilling to beg him to take her back, although, then, she'd felt so much guilt over it. Seeing him in person had finally put the myriad thoughts and emotions in order, and she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, she no longer loved Christopher—if she ever

had. In that moment, she knew it was *Jack* whom she loved and wanted to be with more than anything.

With that decision made, it was a simple matter of shunting Christopher off to Jack's unused cabin, so they could enjoy the last day of the cruise together. Then Jack, with nothing to hold him anywhere, simply flew home with her when the trip was over. That *should* have been their happily ever after, and she scowled as they pulled into a parking spot in front of her building, because Christopher had ruined that and caused even more harm.

It was as though he was determined to make sure she wasn't happy unless she was with him, and she'd never go back to him now, not after what he'd done. She'd returned to her job, dreading seeing him, but hopeful that she could continue to work there, at least until she could find something else. Instead, Christopher had made that impossible. He'd taken it upon himself to hire an investigator to research Jack, and in only a few days, the detective had discovered Jack's identity was false. It was for her own good, he'd claimed.

But the information was no shock to Katherine, of course. As a time-traveler, Jack would *have* to live with fake documents in a time period where everyone was tracked, but she couldn't explain that to Christopher. Not that her ex cared much about *why* Jack's papers were fake. He only cared that he could use it as a threat to blackmail Katherine back to his side. It had worked, somewhat. She'd obeyed and called Jack to inform him that she could no longer see him, but when it came to becoming Christopher's submissive girlfriend again—well, that was something she couldn't do. The very thought of it made her queasy.

With everything in shambles, she wasn't thinking clearly, and the only plan she could come up with to keep Jack safe was to avoid him, until he gave up and left. If he could have taken her through time with him, there would have been more choices, but he couldn't take a passenger, and Christopher would make sure Jack was hounded by the authorities if he tried to stay.

So, she had begun looking for another job, hoping to give Christopher one less thing to hold over her, while hiding from Jack at her friend Maria's house. It wasn't the best solution, but it was all she could come up with. It left her feeling completely alone and miserable, with both men now off limits for good, and by her own choice this time.

She'd known that Jack wouldn't be able to find her at Maria's, but she'd been wrong about him giving up and leaving. He was tenacious and determined to at least talk to her. He had no idea what had happened or why she'd dumped him like that, and he wanted answers before he went anywhere.

While she worried about when she'd be able to get off Maria's couch and go back home, her friend had decided that enough was enough. If Katherine was going to be ridiculous about the matter, she'd settle things herself. When a week had passed with no signs of anything getting better, Maria had simply gone ahead and ratted her out to Jack and then made herself and her kids scarce. Katherine had walked into Maria's house to find her angry time-traveling lover waiting for her.

She'd thrown the whole plan away, almost the second she'd set eyes on him, as she'd known she would. It was why she'd avoided him in the first place. She needed him in her life, and both her mind and body had been craving his presence. The moment they were face-to-face, that magnetic attraction kicked in and she realized she was an idiot. Or, at least she'd been letting her fears control her to the extent that she hadn't been thinking logically.

Yes, she'd wanted to protect Jack from Christopher's petty revenge, but she hadn't needed Jack to remind her that as a time traveler, he was in no danger of arrest. She'd known it. She'd known they could just leave and never come back. Christopher couldn't hurt them if he couldn't find him, and she had very little reason to stay.

But that didn't mean she wasn't afraid to leave the familiar. She'd fought so hard to keep her apartment, and now she was going

to lose it, anyway. Was Jack worth it? Oh, hell yeah, he was worth everything to her, but her fears had seen a chance to hold her back and they'd jumped to use Christopher's threat as an excuse. She'd needed to see Jack, needed his arms around her, to finally be able to see the truth. It was, of course, why she'd fought so hard to keep from having to face him. She couldn't lie to him; he always knew when she was lying, and that meant she couldn't keep lying to herself, either.

Of course, she still had to face the music for what she'd put them both through over the past week. She shut off the car and shot a side glance in his direction, trying to gauge his mood. A muscle jumped in his jaw. A clear sign he was clenching it; he tended to do that when he was annoyed.

"Well, we're home," she said nervously and then winced at how inane she sounded.

He shifted in his seat to look at her, one eyebrow sliding up in obvious amusement. "Worried about something, Kitty?" he asked. His eyes seemed to bore into her and she could feel the weight of them, even though she was stubbornly refusing to look in his direction.

"Who, me? What would I have to be worried about?" she muttered as she took the keys from the ignition and got out of the car. She'd only dumped him over the phone with barely any explanation, except a lie, then ran away and hid from him for a week; how much trouble could she possibly be in? She noticed that there was a sarcastic tone to her inner monologue. She'd literally messed up so badly that even in her head, she was rolling her eyes at her choices.

After a week of searching for her, it seemed like Jack had no intention of letting there be any space between them. He got out quickly and moved around to intercept her at the back of the car. She gave him a surprised look and then realized he was waiting to help her with her suitcase as he opened the trunk so he could grab it. "I thought you might be worried that I was going to put you

across my knee and spank you until you couldn't sit down for a week," he said casually as he hefted the heavy bag and waited for her to close the lid.

Her cheeks flared with a mixture of embarrassment and desire. She wouldn't enjoy the punishment when it came—she had no misconceptions there—but at the moment, there was a certain yearning for any kind of physical touch. For a week, she'd been going crazy over the memory of his hand, both the gentle caresses and the harsh spanks, and now he'd casually dropped that comment as if he'd known how it would affect her. He probably did; he seemed to have a sixth sense for knowing how she'd react to things like this—either that, or she was just that transparent.

She slammed the trunk shut with more emphasis than necessary and clamped down on the urge to ask him if that was what he was planning to do. For one thing, she didn't really need to ask since there was very little chance of him letting her get away with what she'd done. Added to that was the fact that if she actually managed to force the words out, her face would be glowing crimson by the time she finished. She couldn't talk about things like that without her skin taking on the vivid red of a sunset, every time.

It was best, she decided, to remain silent as she followed him into the building. He held her heavy bag without strain while she fumbled with the keys, finally setting it down and taking them from her when it became clear they were going to end up standing out in the hall all night if he didn't. He unlocked the door and stepped back, letting her precede him as he grabbed the luggage. She had a brief urge to run, but they both knew she wouldn't dare. She didn't want to get away, anyway, not after a long week of missing him. All she wanted right now was to crawl into his lap and let the worries and fears dissolve while he comforted her. She gave him a look that was filled with need, feeling suddenly very young and lost as she watched him close and lock the door.

When he turned around and caught sight of her expression, he dropped the bag and opened his arms for her wordlessly. She

rushed into them, as a sob burst out of her. Her arms wrapped around him and she clung to him desperately, tears streaming down her face as the hard knot of tension slowly uncoiled in her stomach. She felt like she could breathe for the first time in a week, which was ironic because all of the crying was stuffing up her sinuses terribly and she sounded like a hoarse, sniffling mess when she was finally able to talk again.

She hadn't let herself break down in Maria's house, as much as she'd wanted to when she'd entered and seen him there waiting for her; she couldn't. There was something about being in her home space, alone with him, where she knew no one would walk in, that finally allowed her to rip through the built-up emotions and let them all out. She was very aware of his low soothing whisper and the comforting hand gently rubbing slow circles on her back as she babbled and cried and probably made no sense at all.

He scooped her up and carried her to the couch as she cried. Her arms looped around his neck and she settled comfortably against his body when he sat down on the old futon. She'd never felt so safe as she did in his lap, with him holding her, and right then, it didn't matter if Christopher had the entire police force on their way to her house. All that mattered was that she was back home with Jack and he didn't hate her for ghosting on him without explanation.

She wasn't sure how long it took for her to finally wind down. There'd been a large backlog of misery to get through and her eyes were sore and red by the time the tears finally stopped falling. His shirt was soaked dark from absorbing so much of the waterworks, but her shirt sleeve hadn't escaped, either. Through it all, he'd kept up the constant stream of reassurances, both verbal and physical, and only when she seemed to be completely calm did he tip her chin back.

"Feeling better, darlin'?" he asked gently.

She took a long deep breath and then nodded. She didn't trust

herself to be able to talk coherently yet, and she felt like she'd done enough rambling by then.

"Good girl. Why don't you go wash your face and blow your nose, then we can talk, all right?" he suggested. There was that slight tinge of old south in his voice that she noticed sometimes, the sound of it was low and silky, a comfort to her nerves.

She slid out of his lap with reluctance, not wanting to leave that aura of safety, but she really did need to clean up and do something about her runny nose. She disappeared into the bathroom without argument and washed her face as he suggested, then went a step further and held a cool cloth over her eyes to soothe the redness. Her face felt raw from all the salt and the wash helped. She felt almost human when she came back out to give him a nervous smile.

"I'm going to change real quick. My shirt is soaked," she said as she ducked into the bedroom. Her apartment was small, and with the door open, she could hear his response—and the ironic tone—clearly, "So is mine, but I don't think your shirts will fit me," he said, and she had to laugh.

She took a second to figure out what to wear and finally decided to get into pajamas. It was unlikely they'd be leaving the apartment tonight, and she wanted to be comfortable. When she stepped back into the living room, she was wearing an oversized flannel set that bagged around her legs and arms, making her look smaller and younger than she was—or maybe that was the uncertain expression on her face. They still had a lot to work out, after all.

But there was one good thing. She held up a man's shirt and said, "You left this here last week. It's probably not very clean, but it's dry." She looked pointedly at the dark wet spot in the center of his t-shirt and tossed it to him.

He caught it with one hand and grinned. "Forgot about that. Thank you, kitten," he said as he shrugged off the damp clinging fabric and pulled the button-up shirt on. "That's more comfortable."

He paused, looking at her as she wavered in the doorway. "We have a lot to talk through, and we're not going to get very far if you're worrying, so just to set your mind at ease—I'm not going to spank you tonight. I'd rather not have you bawling your eyes out twice in one evening," he said.

She relaxed for a second, but there was almost a sense of disappointment lurking. She knew it was just a temporary reprieve. It was hard to believe he would let her escape consequences for running off on him like that, even if he hadn't flat out said she was going to be punished. She knew she'd messed up in a lot of ways and Jack wasn't the type of man to let it go, so the punishment would come and it would be painful and embarrassing. That should have meant she'd be happy to put it off as long as possible, but the truth was she really wanted to get it over with and out of the way.

It wasn't just so she could stop worrying about it hanging over her head, though that was definitely a factor. It was also because there was a kind of bonding that occurred between them when he punished her, and she felt like she needed that now. The pain and emotions that came with punishment tended to break down her walls and get through to her in a way that other things didn't. She wanted to go into this conversation about their future with a clean slate.

"Jack, I—" She stopped and took a deep breath, her hands nervously twisting the hem of her pajama top as she considered if she really wanted to continue that thought.

"What's wrong, Katherine?" he asked as he watched her.

"It's just...I mean I know it's up to you, but I'd rather not wait for the punishment. Is that okay? I mean, part of me wants to put it off as long as possible, but I'm not sure I'll be able to really concentrate on anything else until it's over, and I really just—" She struggled for a second, trying to find a way to express her need for him to reestablish his dominance over her, to remind her that he was the boss so that her mind and heart could settle.

He didn't make her find a way to say the difficult words, under-

standing immediately what she was trying to express. "Are you sure that's what you want?" he asked in a carefully gentle tone. "I thought you might want to spend the night talking and relaxing together, but if that's what you want, we can take care of the punishment first."

She laughed, a tinge of nervousness to it as she shook her head. "Want? No, I really don't want to deal with the p-punishment at all, Jack. But need—yeah, I think I need it to get past this whole awful week." She freed one hand from the twisted fabric and it went automatically to her hair, tucking it back behind her ear as she let her eyes meet his. "Spanking doesn't fix all the problems, not even most of them, but I think it will help with some of the emotional stuff," she said.

His dark brown eyes held hers for a second, a searching look as he tried to gauge what she was feeling, but then he nodded. "I think I understand," he said softly. He held out a hand to her and she crossed the floor slowly and took it. To her surprise, he didn't pull her down across his lap; instead, he pulled her to sit in it, wrapping an arm around her waist and holding her tight. "I understand, and we'll take care of it in a few minutes. I just want to hold you first. I missed you this week," he admitted.

It felt so good to be held again, to feel his strong arms around her, and she sighed, relaxing into him and resting her head on his shoulder. "This feels so right. Every doubt and fear I have just seems to disappear when I'm in your arms. It's scary, in a way," she whispered.

"Scary? Why?" The words tickled her ear, his lips were so close, but he made no attempt to kiss the sensitive spots he knew so well. He had no interest in winding her up when they had more important matters to deal with.

"Because—because the problems aren't really gone. They'll still be there later. It's a false sense of security," she explained after some thought.

"Oh no, it's a very real sense of security. It just doesn't erase the

rest of the world, but there are no problems that we can't deal with together. I think you just forgot that you don't have to deal with things alone anymore," he reminded her. There was just a touch of recrimination there and she winced, knowing he was right.

"I'm sorry, Jack. For all of it, for everything. And I'm sorry for Christopher making problems—"

He interrupted her, "Stop. You can apologize for your mistakes, and thank you, but you don't get to apologize for Christopher. His choices are his choices, and all you need to worry about are your own. I think you have enough guilt on your plate at the moment, don't you?" he asked.

She bit down on her bottom lip, silently listing her mistakes in her head. It was an impressive total, which she was going to have to pay for. "I guess you're right," she said.

"While we're on the subject, before we get down to the punishment part, how about you tell me what you're in trouble for?" It wasn't a suggestion; no matter how he phrased it, the tone made it clear it was an order.

"It would be easier to say what I'm not in trouble for," she grumbled, more at herself than at him, and then sighed. "I'm guessing you're looking for a bit more than 'I messed everything up,'" she said.

"A bit more, yes." His lip twitched like he was tempted to laugh, but otherwise, he maintained the serious look.

"I made choices that affected both of us, without talking to you. I didn't even give you a chance to talk and then I vanished and hid from you. And I...hurt you," she added. It was hard to think about that part.

"You hurt both of us, darlin'. Don't think you're not in trouble for hurting yourself, too, because that's on my list for sure," he said.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess." She frowned; it had hurt her a lot, but she'd had to deal with that pain all week. It seemed unfair to punish her on top of it.

"Self-destructive behavior isn't allowed, Kitty. I don't care if it's

emotional or physical. I'm not going to let you hurt yourself without consequence," he said firmly.

She couldn't really deny it had been self-destructive. She felt like she'd put herself through the wringer. It hadn't been her goal. She'd had good intentions, wanting to save Jack from Christopher's machinations, but it hadn't been very well thought out and she knew that now. "I'm sorry, Jack. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"I know. Next time, you'll have a reason to stop and consider your actions. All you'll need to do is think back to how much your backside ached from the spanking you're about to get, and that should make you pause," he said.

Her bottom lip trembled, forming a pout, and she buried her face against his chest. She needed the punishment and she wanted to get it over with, but listening to him say things like that made her wish she could change her mind and put it off. Not that he was likely to allow that at this point, but it was a temptation. "I wish I could take it all back," she whispered sadly.

"I do, too, but this is where we are now. Are you ready to get it over with?" he asked.

"No, but...but I guess we better do it anyway," she replied after a long silence.

He shifted her in his lap and set her on her feet in front of him. "Need you to go get your hairbrush, Katherine," he said with a hint of iron in his tone that kept her from protesting.

Her stomach dropped miserably, but she didn't even bother trying to appeal to his sense of mercy. She shot him one pleading look and then obediently went to the bathroom to find her brush. She had several for dealing with her wild curls, but she knew the one he meant. It was the heavy wooden one with the flat back that he wanted. The one that seemed almost *designed* for punishment.

She picked it up and brought it back to him with reluctance in every dragging step. He took it from her gently, turning it over to get a look at it. He'd used it on her before, on the ship, and had found it to be extremely effective. Even with care, it had left small

marks on her that lasted for a day or two. He'd tried to minimize that, both because it was a cruise and he knew she'd be spending a great deal of time in bathing suits, but also because he hadn't known well enough what her tolerances were then.

Learning how much punishment someone could handle and how much they needed was a gradual process. The speed of their relationship had quickly outstripped his intentions and had presented him with a situation to deal with, so he'd done his best. Now that he knew her limits better, he seemed determined to do a much more thorough job. With the long list of mistakes she'd made over the past week, she was unlikely to be sitting comfortably the next day, and the anxious look on her face made it clear that she knew it.

Her eyes were fixed on his hands and the brush they held. "I did say I was sorry, right?" she asked in a tight, nervous tone of voice.

"You did. I think you're about to be even sorrier, though." He patted his knee. "C'mon, let's get this started," he said.

She felt like if she stalled at all, her courage might break and she'd end up begging him not to punish her. If she'd thought it had *any* chance of working, she might have tried, but it would only humiliate her and accomplish nothing, so she moved immediately, almost throwing herself over his lap in her haste to keep from making this any more embarrassing.

If he was surprised at the suddenness, he didn't say anything about it as he wrapped an arm around her waist and hitched her up against his body. He shifted her slightly forward at the same time, sliding her head closer to the floor to make her backside a more presentable target, then let her adjust herself to a more comfortable position. Once she was settled, he handed her the brush.

"Hold onto that until I ask for it," he instructed.

She groaned but took it and set it on the floor just below her head—knowing that staring at it was going to make the punishment worse. She had a feeling that was why he did it, but that was only part of the reason. He also did it to make her an active part of

the punishment. There was a tendency for someone to tune out during a spanking; by making her participate in small ways, it forced her to be present, and it also kept it from being something that was just being done *to her*. This way, the punishment was something they were getting through together, and while she didn't realize that on the surface, underneath, it did resonate with her.

He left her pajama bottoms up. They were thin enough that they weren't going to provide much protection and it would add another layer (so to speak) to the punishment. With his left arm resting across her back, his right arm came up and he brought his hand down sharply across the seat of her pants.

The sound was muffled by the fabric, but the sting didn't feel muted at all, and she was proud of herself for not letting out a yelp in response. If there was any doubt in her mind about whether a spanking was punishment or sexy foreplay, it was always made clear immediately from the first smack. Jack didn't tend to start off easy when he was punishing her, and this time was no exception.

His hand came down sharply and she rocked forward with it, but she didn't make a sound. By the fifth time his palm crashed down on her upturned rump, she was biting her bottom lip to keep silent but still proud of herself for maintaining her calm, because he was clearly making a point. It wasn't that he was spanking harder than usual, it was that he wasn't giving her any time between strikes to recover.

When he spanked her for fun, he often built up to heavy slaps that rocked her with the force, but he took his time getting there, building the heat and sting slowly so that her arousal climbed with them. She could take a lot of pain when she was able to accommodate it with time between each slap and a break now and then, with rubbing and caresses mixed in. She got none of that this time, and even for a punishment spanking, the tempo seemed pronounced.

The spansks landed with a heavy flurry of smacks that had her bouncing and squirming under the steady rain and he continued that way for a good five minutes. Not that she was able to keep

track of the time, of course. She'd tried to count them in her head at first, but they came too fast and too hard for her to keep up, and eventually, she lost track, using all her concentration to try to take the punishment with some dignity.

She didn't always bother to maintain her composure. In fact, she rarely did, feeling that taking a spanking quietly and without struggling would lead to it lasting longer. She was afraid that, first, Christopher, and now, Jack, would think it didn't hurt enough if she didn't make a fuss. She was probably right when it came to Christopher; he'd always been too wrapped up in his own desires to pay attention to her reactions, but she hadn't yet learned that it wouldn't work with Jack.

He tended to ignore her struggling, the pleading, and the crying, instead paying attention to her body language and to the physical results of the spanking he was dishing out. Those were the things that guided him as he punished her, not how much noise she was making, but eventually, she'd learn that. For now, her stoicism was for two entirely different reasons. One was that she felt like she needed a harsh punishment to get over everything that had happened.

She needed the release of the pain to wipe away all the negative emotions she'd been steeping in for the past week. It would take away the guilt of hurting him and go a long way towards replacing the sadness with safety and security as she surrendered to his dominance again. Those things wouldn't keep her quiet very long, though, not once the heat in her backside took hold and she decided she'd been punished enough. The second reason probably helped her to maintain silence a little longer—her apartment walls were fairly thin and the last thing she wanted was for the neighbors to hear her howling while she got her butt spanked.

But as his hand continued its staccato rain of fire across her ass, it got harder to care what the neighbors thought they were hearing. He was an expert spanker, making sure to catch the same place several times so the sting built fast, before moving to a new spot.

He covered her entire backside and it felt like he didn't miss a spot, even though he couldn't see her skin.

When he suddenly stopped, she froze. She knew there wasn't the slightest chance it was over; the hairbrush on the floor in front of her assured her of that, which meant his stopping was a sign that things were about to get worse. She was trying to prepare herself to hand him the brush when he asked for it, but that's not why he was stopping.

"Up, Katherine, on your feet," he said, giving the back of her thigh a gentle smack after a few seconds passed without her moving.

She gave him a confused look over her shoulder and then slid back off his lap and got to her feet nervously. She hadn't expected this and had no idea what was going to happen now. "Are—are you through?" she asked.

One eyebrow went up as if to say, 'Are you kidding me?' and he shook his head. "We've barely even started, but we're going to try something new this time. Well, new for us. Maybe you've experienced this before," he said as he stood up and took her by the arm. He escorted her to the only empty corner of her small living room and then he turned her to face the wall and pushed her gently into it. "I think a little time to reflect on your choices this week will do you good. I've been told that time seems to freeze when you're facing the wall, and it drags on forever while you worry about what comes next."

He paused and then sighed, "That's how I felt all week, Katherine, so this should be appropriate, don't you think?"

She didn't answer, but he didn't seem to need a response. She could hear him moving away and sitting back down across the room, and she hugged herself with both arms. She could feel his eyes on her and she struggled not to fidget as she stood there. She'd experienced a different kind of corner time with Christopher. He'd sometimes have her kneel naked in the corner of his office, so he could watch her as he worked. It was less for punishment—though

he usually listed something she'd done as a reason—than for his own amusement, and they both knew it. Whether she faced the wall or had her back to it was arbitrary, depending on which view he felt like enjoying. The act had made her feel very submissive and owned—this was different.

She didn't feel submissive; she felt like a child. A naughty child who had misbehaved and was being punished. It affected her emotions in a surprising way and she felt her bottom lip trembling as she reviewed the past week. It refreshed her anger at Christopher for what he'd done, but the real focus was how many mistakes she'd made as a result. Why had she gone along with it? She knew now, she should have told him off and walked out, but at the time, she'd felt so trapped by his blackmail. She replayed each time she could have stopped and turned things around and had instead continued on her course of self-destruction. There were so many turning points, how had she missed them all? Maria had been right all along.

As he'd said, it did seem like the corner time was lasting forever. She was convinced she'd been standing there for hours by the time he called her back, though a quick look at the clock showed it was only fifteen minutes before she was standing in front of him again. Her bottom lip trembled, and she felt more than a little fragile after the time spent thinking about her behavior.

"I'm sorry, Jack. I-I'm really sorry," she whispered in a small hesitant voice. She'd already said that, but she felt it more now.

"I know you are, Katherine." He paused, looking at her for a few seconds. "Take your pajama bottoms down and back over my knee," he said.

Her eyes welled up with tears, but she blinked them away as her hands went to the waistband of the baggy bottoms, pushing them down over her hips slowly. She wasn't wearing panties underneath, so she was bare from waist to knees as she lowered herself across his legs with a muffled whimper. When he didn't ask for the brush,

she realized she'd be getting another spanking with his hand first, this time on her bare skin.

She was ready to cry just thinking about the brush on top of two doses of his hand, so when his palm cracked down hard across her bare cheek, the tears just started flowing. She managed it silently at first, only the occasional snuffle alerting him to her tears, but as her skin turned a darker red and the stinging built, that got harder. An especially painful swat to the top of her left thigh finally broke her resolve and a pitiful wail burst from her.

The audible sound of her misery didn't stop him. He continued, knowing by now that she wasn't even close to her limits. He took some time to concentrate on the thighs, since it had gotten such a reaction from her, and by the time his hand finally came to rest on the hot skin, her ass and her thighs were a uniform crimson color. He gave her a break, waiting until she calmed and her shoulders stopped shaking.

She wished he'd at least rub some of the sting away, but he didn't. His hand stayed where it was, an ominous reminder that they weren't finished, but he didn't make any attempt to lessen the burning. When she began to shift nervously, anxious to get it over with, he tightened his grip around her waist and tugged her up tight against him.

"Hand me the hairbrush, Katherine," he said. As she reluctantly passed it up to him, he had a few things to say to her. "I'm going easy on you tonight, because I understand why you did what you did. I understand being afraid, and I get that you wanted to protect me, but this won't happen again, or you won't sit comfortably for a week, understand? If you want me to be the boss around here, and I assume that hasn't changed, then you can't cut me out of the decisions like that. You can't just react and make major life-changing choices without thinking things through, either. I deserved better, and so did you."

His tone was calm but firm, and the most important thing to her just then was the part where he'd said he was going to go easy on

her. That was what got her through the next few minutes as he began to spank her with the brush. The wood was glossy from layers of shellac and it picked up glints of light as it slapped down firmly on her rump, but she couldn't see it. She certainly felt it, though, and that was more than enough for her to deal with. Each time it connected with her skin, the crisp smacking sound of wood meeting flesh echoed loudly in the room. No doubt her neighbors were curious about the sounds, and when her cries, begging and pain-filled, added to the repetitive cracking, it probably became clear what was happening. At least that was her fear, possibly the noises weren't nearly as loud as she thought they were—but she wouldn't bet on it.

This time, she was able to keep track of each smack. The crisp bite of the hairbrush made a deep impression on her rump and he took his time in delivering all twenty, with plenty of pause after each one for her to appreciate the ferocious burn it left. By the time he had finished and set the brush aside, she was sobbing all over again, and this time it went on for a while, even after he picked her up and turned her in his arms to comfort her.

There was a babble of apologies pouring out her mouth in between the sobs and sniffles. Some of the crying was from the pain, her backside throbbed with a pulse of its own, but most of it was from the dam of emotions breaking. There was so much there that had been held back, all the misery of the past week, the fear and sadness as she saw her relationship with Jack dissolving before her eyes, and then the relief when he'd come and retrieved her from Maria's house. It had all coalesced into a painful lump in her stomach that had been sitting there since they got in the car. Now, at last, it was unraveling, and she felt like she could breathe again.

Which was ironic because her head was stuffy from all the crying she'd been doing, and she couldn't inhale through her nose at the moment. It made it a little hard to understand what she was saying, but Jack seemed to get the gist of it as he held her in his arms and gently rubbed her back until she stopped crying. He

murmured soothing things to her that she could barely hear over all the noise she was making, but it was still a comforting sound.

He gave her the time she needed to pull herself together, and when she was ready, he set her on her feet and pulled her pajamas up for her. "I feel like we've already done this tonight but—why don't you go clean up while I see what we've got that we can throw together for dinner?" he suggested.

The reminder of food made her stomach growl and she frowned, "I don't think there's much here since I've been gone all week. Why don't I order a pizza, instead?"

Jack agreed, and since she knew the neighborhood and he didn't, she placed the order at her favorite place. "I think I need a shower; my head hurts from all the crying," she said after she'd hung up.

He stood up and dropped a light kiss on her forehead, "That sounds like a good idea, kitten," he agreed.

She took her time in the shower, knowing the food would likely take a while, and that Jack could get the door if it came before she was out. The hot water did her a lot of good, and she let the spray pound down until all the tension and stress was washed away, along with the congestion in her sinuses. When she reappeared in the bathroom door back in her pajamas, with her hair wrapped in a towel, she felt much better, and her timing was perfect because, just as she stepped out, there was a knock at the door.

Jack answered it and paid for the pizza, too. As much as she wanted to argue about that, it was too hard to fuss while her backside was still aching from the hairbrush, so she thanked him meekly and gingerly sat down at the small table to eat. Besides, she knew he was going to eat the majority of it anyway, which made it seem much fairer that he was paying for it.

She nibbled her way through two slices and then went for a third when she saw how fast the rest was disappearing. Normally, she'd have limited herself, because the slices were huge and she was always watching her calories in a futile attempt to drop a few

pounds, but it was the first time she'd had a real appetite all week. Stress and sadness had made it hard to force herself to eat, even though she'd been cooking for Maria's family most nights. Besides, the greasy decadence of a veggie and meat loaded pizza was usually worth the extra calories, in her opinion.

When the last slice had been devoured, Jack sat back with a satisfied expression and watched her slowly eating her third slice. "That was the best deep-dish I've had in a while," he commented. "Wasn't expecting that in Colorado."

She laughed. "I know; it's been my favorite since they opened last year. They're popular, though, so even though they're only like five minutes away, there's usually a wait, sometimes two hours on the weekend."

It was just inane small talk and it was nice to relax and chat, but they had a lot of serious things to discuss, and after a few minutes, she took a deep breath, mentally preparing herself. "I guess we should make some plans," she said.

Jack nodded, but he didn't seem immediately inclined to start the conversation and, instead, got to his feet and cleared away the pizza box and paper plates. She started to help, but he motioned for her to stay seated, and she realized he just needed to move while he put his thoughts together. "I doubt Christopher is going to go to all the trouble of involving the government in this, but we need to plan for it, in case," he said as he finally sat back down.

She sighed and ran both hands through her hair, pulling it back behind her head and twisting the wet hanks into a bun as she thought. "I-I'm not so sure he won't, Jack. I never thought he'd go this far, honestly, and now, well." She stopped and then shook her head. "He never really planned to dump me; it was a trick to make me stop holding out about moving into his house. In his mind, we never broke up, and now he's pissed because he's convinced himself that you stole me, or we cheated, or something. His pride and ego are hurt, and he's never dealt with that well," she said.

Even though she couldn't have expected this situation, she did

know that Christopher tended to hold grudges. He was very good at pretending to be over things; she'd seen it at work. People would upset him, apologize, and he'd tell them it was no problem with a smile, but six months later, they'd be out the door with their reputation in shreds. He played the long game, and he was good at it. Worse, he had a sly way of doing things, so it wasn't traced back to him.

As his submissive girlfriend, she'd heard all the stories from him and she'd cringed as he told them with such relish, knowing she'd never say a word. But he was so good at making himself seem like the underdog getting a victory that she'd been able to dismiss the behavior. She should have seen it for what it was, but she hadn't, and she was regretting that now.

"That makes it even more important that we decide on a few things now, then," he replied. "As important as that is, we have something else we need to discuss first."

She looked at him curiously, and for a second, she experienced a flipping sensation in her stomach as she had a sudden fear she was in trouble for something else. But, no, he'd have dealt with it during the spanking if that was the case, so she relaxed. "What's that?" she asked.

"Well, darlin', I'm pretty sure I know what the answer is, but I'd like to get something formal agreed on when it comes to me being in charge. Truth to tell, this is pretty much the way I am. The way I'll always be, but we've gone a bit further along than me just being an alpha male who takes control. When it comes to punishing you and setting rules like we've been doing, we're definitely in the territory of a Dom/sub relationship, and I'm fine with that but—it needs to be said, so, is that what you want from me?" He said it all slowly, each word enunciated carefully as though afraid there might be a misunderstanding. It was obviously something he'd put some thought into.

"Yes," she replied simply.

He paused, waiting for her to say more as his dark chocolate

eyes examined her expression. "Yes?" he asked finally, prompting her to speak.

She hadn't really been thinking about it because, to her, it seemed like everything was settled, but now she had to put the words together. "I realized, when I was with Christopher, that being submissive wasn't just a bedroom fantasy for me. I figured out that I wanted the whole package, and then he dumped me, and I thought I'd never have it again. I knew there were plenty of people out there who had relationships like that, but I'm not really good at social things. Meeting people, relationships—I'm just not good at it," she said, dragging her fingernails over the table top, making invisible designs as she tried to make the words come.

She looked up, meeting his eyes suddenly. "And then I met you. And I realized that what I'd had with Christopher was barely even the beginning of the kind of relationship I wanted. It was just kinky bedroom games under a veneer of D/s. It wasn't until you came along that I realized it could go deeper—so, yes. Yes, I'd like you to be in charge. To be my dominant." She dropped her eyes again, examining the table as her cheeks flushed.

"And you want romance as well as the sex—dating and maybe, eventually...more?" he asked carefully. It was obvious they both enjoyed the sexual aspect of their relationship and that being dominated turned her on, but dating was a different issue.

"Oh, yes, please. If you want me, that is. I want—I feel like I want everything with you. When I said that you should treat me like we lived in the old times when the man was in charge of the house and could discipline his wife, I meant it. I could see us married, someday, maybe..." She trailed off, her voice full of embarrassed nervousness as she remembered how short their time together had been.

"Good. That's what I want, too, eventually. So, we'll continue as we have been, and from now on, you can consider yourself *mine*," he said. There was an emphasis there that made her shiver. It felt like he'd said the word with all capital letters and there was a hint

of ownership in his voice that she loved. She wanted to tell him that, but before she could muster the words, he was continuing the conversation.

"And you're still sure you don't want a safe word?" he asked. They'd discussed this after the first punishment he'd given her, and she'd decided then that she would prefer not to be tempted to stop things too soon. To her, it made discipline feel more like a game, and Jack, who'd lived before safe words were invented but also after it became common to use them, was willing to let her have her way on the issue. So far, she'd stuck with it without complaint.

"I'm sure," she said with a firm nod. She appreciated that he kept checking, but the only time she thought she might change her mind was while she was ass up in the middle of a spanking, and that was *exactly* why she didn't want one. When things started to burn and sting, she'd do almost anything to stop the pain, including using a magic word to end the punishment. Those thoughts reminded her that her backside was still sore and aching, and she shifted, grateful for the thick cushion on her seat that helped somewhat.

"We're going to have to set up a list of rules, I suppose," he mused. "That's a bit more formal than I've done in the past, but it shouldn't be too hard to work it out. For now, the basics are going to be really simple—don't put yourself in danger, keep yourself healthy, and be honest with me. Got it?"

Since every time she'd gotten in trouble so far, it had been for messing up in one of those categories, she nodded. It was vague, but they could fine-tune it as they went along. She didn't need to be micromanaged, anyway; she was fairly self-sufficient when she wasn't over her head in depression. "One thing, though. I think when it comes to major life decisions, I deserve a say in things," she said in a firm tone.

"Well, that goes without saying." He paused. "Or maybe it doesn't—seems like when it came to Christopher, he didn't want you to have any say at all." Jack had been careful not to say much of how he felt about Christopher, knowing that Katherine was still getting

over things and might have residual loyalty there that would cause her to get upset hearing it. Now things had changed, and after what her ex had done, he knew she no longer had any positive feelings for him. "He was abusive, and I'm not like that. You'll have a say in all the big decisions, kitten; you have my word," he assured her.

"You're right, as soon as he admitted the break up was fake, I realized he wasn't what I thought he was." She shrugged, feeling like an idiot every time she thought about how she'd been fooled. "So, if the whole relationship thing is settled, I think we'd better talk about where we go from here, but, uh—" Flushing as she shifted again, she added, "I think I'd concentrate better if I was sitting some place more comfortable or wasn't sitting at all. I don't think we're going anywhere tonight, so what if we talk about it in bed?"

Jack gave her an amused look. "You sure this isn't just an attempt to get sex out of me?" he teased.

He tended to avoid sex right after punishment because he didn't want her to think of it as foreplay, something she regretted normally, but sex was the last thing on her mind at the moment. She snorted and shook her head. "Tempting, it might take my mind off the pain, but, no, we really should get some things settled tonight," she said.

A few minutes later, they were stretched out comfortably on the bed, and she had noticed an immediate relief lying on her side, so they could talk. "If there's a danger he'll follow through on his threats, I should leave soon. They can't really hold me, of course, but I don't want to leave a front-page mystery behind, either. My face splashed all over the media will make disappearing a lot harder. The question is...can you handle leaving fast?" he said. He stroked her cheek gently with his thumb as he looked into her eyes.

"I-I think so," she said, trying not to sound nervous. "I don't think he's going to do anything as long as I keep going into work, but obviously, I can't keep the job. And as soon as I quit, he'll realize I'm really not going back to him and then...well." Until then, Christopher would think he still had a chance, but once she left his

employ, he'd start working on getting revenge, and they both knew how that would play out.

"So, you either keep going to work until we leave, or I leave first and—"

She jerked violently, cutting him off in mid-sentence. "No. Please, if I realized anything this past week, it's that I don't want to be without you," she said vehemently.

"Kitty, I'd come back for you. I crossed time for you, so I'm not going to have a problem crossing state lines to get you," he said. He chuckled softly and pulled her closer to him, wrapping an arm around her so he could rub her back. "I don't like the idea of leaving first, either, though. I think we're going to have to make a list of things you need to do before we can go, and we'll see how long it will take and plan from there."

It wasn't a long list. She just didn't have all that many ties to sever, but before they could put a plan into action, she'd fallen asleep, and once he got himself situated with an arm around her, he joined her.